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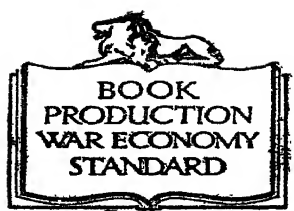
MEDITERRANEAN NIGHTS

A Collection of Short Stories

by
DENNIS WHEATLEY

18TH THOUSAND

HUTCHINSON & CO. (*Publishers*) LTD.
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DEDICATION

For Aunt Nell, my cousin Laurie, Joan, Diana, Amy, Dick "Hitch" and all those other friends and Editors who by the help, encouragement and opportunity they gave me, contributed something to this collection of stories.

DENNIS WHEATLEY.

CONTENTS

MEDITERRANEAN NIGHTS

	PAGE
Story I. ESPIONAGE	10
„ II. BOLLINGER, VERY DRY	23
„ III. BORROWED MONEY	31
„ V. THE NOTORIOUS MADAME RIBEREAU	46
„ VII. THE SECRET SIGN	65
„ VIII. DEATH AT THREE-THIRTY	71
„ IX. THE GOLDEN SPANIARD	76
„ XI. ATHENIAN GOLD	91
„ XIII. THESE WOMEN	103
„ XVI. A DEAL IN CYPRUS WINE	134
„ XIX. "A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE"	166
„ XXI. VENDETTA	196

THE MAN WITH THE GIRLISH FACE

Story IV. THE CRIPPLED LADY	43
„ X. DEATH IN THE FLAG	88
„ XII. NIGHT PATROL	100
„ XV. CHANNEL CROSSING	131
„ XVIII. THE BITER BIT	163
„ XX. TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE	193

OUT OF SERIES

Story VI. THE SNAKE WITH THE DIAMOND EYES	58
(A very early effort.)	
„ XIV. THE TERRORIST	114
(A story for the Talking Screen.)	
„ XVII. THYROID	144
(A One Act Play.)	

THIS BOOK

FOR ME THE WAR OPENED IN THE EARLY SPRING OF 1939 WHEN, AS A Government speaker, I stumped the country calling for volunteers for every form of National Service. Then, once the war was on in earnest I found that, contrary to a widespread but quite erroneous conception, our Planning Staffs were by no means averse to examining unorthodox suggestions. In fact, although a great part of my ideas proved quite impractical of application I was nevertheless encouraged to write some half-million words on various war problems.

Thus, for the best part of three years I was employed, unofficially and spasmodically so that, between whiles and by working far harder than I have ever done before I still managed to find time to write my books. But a time came when it was considered that I could be more useful if I put on uniform and on December 12th, 1941, I was granted a commission in the R.A.F.V.R.

That changed my whole situation as, although in the past I have burned much midnight oil, I find it quite impossible to switch my mind off my duties every twelve hours and concentrate on writing a new fiction book in the very little leisure I now get.

In consequence, to fill a gap which all of us hope will not be over-long, it was suggested that I should collect some of my short stories, published and unpublished, into volume form.

I have never been a prolific short-story writer; although in that medium I was lucky, as I have been in so many other things. Having written a tale of adventure, *The Forbidden Territory*, and an historical biography, *Old Rowley: A Private Life of Charles II*, in the spring and autumn of 1932, I decided to try my hand at a few short stories.

Both books were taken by my present publisher, but before either had actually appeared in print my first short story came out in *Nash's Magazine*, and a month later it was published in the United States by *The Cosmopolitan*.

Having hit the high spots of the short-story market in both continents before my name had even appeared on the cover of a book, there is some reason to suppose that I might have made quite a reputation as a short-story writer, but fate decreed otherwise.

The British Public was kind enough to take *The Forbidden Territory* to its heart. Two days before it came out my publishers rang me up to tell me that the whole of the first edition had been sold to the trade on orders placed by librarians and booksellers who had read advance copies, and that the book was being reprinted before it had been published.

For about a year I hovered between the claims of further novels and the desire to justify the friendly encouragement which numerous editors gave me to supply short stories for their magazines. Some authors seem to perform prodigies of production and succeed in

turning out a spate of short stories as well as books; but I found it impossible to do both.

Many people have the idea that I am a prolific writer, and chaff me about being another Wallace who turns out a book a month; but this is a complete misconception. I have never published a line under any name but my own, and in my ten years as an author I have published only twenty novels. Contrast this with the output of a thriller writer of my acquaintance who once stated to me that, under five *nom de plumes*, he had provided the public for which he wrote with seventeen books in *ten months*.

To my own contribution must be added two biographies, some two-score short stories and articles, and a half-share in four murder dossiers: so taken altogether my total output has averaged little more than two-and-a-half books a year. It is true that many of my books are more than twice the length of the normal thriller, but four million words in ten years is barely eleven hundred words a day—a performance which would fill a Wallace, a Zola, or a Dumas with supreme contempt.

The truth is that I will compete with any man in evolving the bare bones of a tale overnight; but for me to get the wretched thing down on to paper is a labour of 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'.

Most of our better novelists produce one double-length book a year, but few of them work longer than the average business man's hours, and most considerably less. To get through my two double-length books per annum I have often had to work for weeks at a stretch from ten each morning till two the next, dictating roughs all day and correcting them half the night; while four week-ends out of every five have been spent in further endless cutting so that an unwieldy quarter-of-a-million word manuscript might be reduced to manageable length and yet lose nothing of the colour of its background and, as the reviewers have often so generously said, remain 'packed with episode and thrills'.

If I have enlarged somewhat on the subject of my books it is in part, at least, because so many readers have written to me asking how they, too, can become successful thriller writers. The only answer I can give is that, apart from a genuine enthusiasm for the job, no special gift is necessary; it is just a matter of never being satisfied as long as an uneasy feeling remains that one could improve a passage by writing it again. But after what I have said it will be clear why I had to abandon the idea of becoming a regular contributor to the short-story market. For many years past I have written an occasional short story only when an editor has chanced to ask me for one in a comparatively quiet spell and definitely commissioned it before I put pen to paper.

Yet, during the early months of my writing career a special vigour, begotten perhaps from the very novelty of the work and elation from its most encouraging success, did enable me to write quite a number of short stories as well as my books. Some of the stories were taken, others were rejected and just thrown into a drawer because, by the time they came back, I was so immersed in new plots that I could not

be bothered to make the alterations suggested by editors or try them again as they stood elsewhere. Now, as a war-time measure, I have dug out a selection which I offer between these covers in the hope that they may provide a few hours' entertainment for that public which has ever shown such a loyal interest in my work.

It will be remarked that more than half the stories form a series, *Mediterranean Nights*, from which the book takes its title. That is no accident as, years ago, when I was writing these stories, I chose their localities in accordance with a definite plan later to collect them from the magazines in which they had appeared and republish them under just that title in book form. But alas, like many another plan, it can only achieve partial fulfilment. There should also have been stories set in Marseilles, Naples, Alexandria, Stamboul, Gibraltar, Malaga, and half a dozen other romantic places, but these never got written or were later used as the main scenes of full-length novels. Instead, a few that are not strictly Mediterranean territory have now been included; and to give good measure six short spy stories of the present war together with a few freak scripts, which may prove amusing, complete the mixture.

The word 'mixture' reminds me that variety is said to be the spice of life. It certainly should be where a collection of short stories is concerned, so instead of giving you all the additional matter at the end of the book I have interlarded it among the Mediterranean tales. Also I thought it would be fun to write a few paragraphs as an introduction to each story telling how it came to be written and if I regard it as good, bad or indifferent. But you will be the best judge of that. I can only say that should my many friends, known and unknown, not find this volume too bad a stop-gap for the third year of the war, I have just enough material left to provide them in a few months' time with one more volume of 'the mixture as before'.

Blessings on you all.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Dennis Wheatley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a single horizontal line that starts under the first part of the name and extends to the right, ending under the last part of the name.

STORY I

THIS STORY CERTAINLY HAS NO CLAIM TO BE INCLUDED IN A VOLUME called *Mediterranean Nights*. But wait a minute! It is set in Paris, and most of us normally set out by way of Paris for those sun-baked romantic shores. What a thrill it was to board the Pullman at Victoria on a cheerless winter day, luggage registered, passport, tickets, money all safe in one's wallet, armed with books and magazines that one never had time to read, cumbered with rugs and flasks and chocolates that seemed to fill every seat; then the supreme moment as the train moved out, ensuring escape from work and worries, bills and badgering, bound for Paris—and beyond.

What is more, the hero of this story was actually on his way to St. Tropez in the South of France and it's hardly his fault that he never got there. Had he done so there would have been no story to tell, and his sole justification for appearing in this book is the ghastly adventure in which he became involved while still on the train.

Incidentally, the episode of the lovely German girl on the train who, although so weak from a recent operation that she could hardly stand, was prevented from catching her proper connection through the petty malice of the French, is taken from real life. I forget her name; but she was a film star who had just met with a spectacular success in England as the result of the Elstree production, 'Sunshine Susie', in which she had played the leading rôle. I fed her occasional sips of brandy from my flask most of the way to Paris.

The story was originally called 'Old Soldiers Never Die', a very favourite theme of mine; but Dick Mealand, the charming and very able American who edited *Nash's* for several years over here, changed it. He was a grand fellow and did much to encourage my early efforts, but he made me cut this story by some two thousand words before he would buy it for publication. Afterwards he told me that his imagination had been caught by the curve of the girl's eyebrows and that he would have bought the darn story anyhow—even if he'd had to cut it himself.

The discerning reader will, I think, agree with me that it would have been a better yarn had it not been so severely cut; but 'Old Soldiers' ran to over 7,000 words and Mealand's normal limit was about 5,500. That is the curse of having to write to space—a job that I have always loathed and one of the reasons why I early abandoned short-story writing. Every tale has a perfect length which is governed by the simplicity or complexity of its plot. Nearly every tale will still be improved by cutting up to 10 per cent. after it first leaves its author's hands in what he considers to be its finished state. Editors know that and are therefore absolutely right to insist on cutting. But if the cutting goes much beyond 10 per cent. then something—background, characterization or suspense—are bound to suffer. In this case it was the suspense since, had another sentence out of the

last 3,000 words been sacrificed the story would no longer have made sense. Still, even as it stands, I've read worse stories, and its best feature remains—the twist at the end.

ESPIONAGE

I REALLY went down to Wimplehays to see the roses. Roses are a bit of a passion with me, and Rowley Thornton's garden has a reputation. It was after lunch, as we were sauntering along the flower-bordered paths, with the blue haze of our cigar smoke circling about our heads in the sunshine, that the talk turned to espionage.

"That army-officer case was incredible," I said. "I had no idea that such things still happened in these days."

"Hadn't you?" he turned to smile at me, the little wrinkles creasing up at the corners of his blue eyes. "Well, they do. I nearly lost my life in Paris less than a month ago——"

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean that—would it be—er—infringing the Official Secrets Act, or anything, to tell me about it?"

"I don't think so," he answered slowly. "You see, I left the service years ago, so in a sense this was a private venture—but I must change the names, of course."

I nodded, glancing at the tall, slim figure by my side with newly awakened interest. He paused a second to run his hand over the smoothly brushed hair just greying at the temples, and then went on thoughtfully:

I was on my way down to St. Tropez, and when I left London I hadn't a thought in my head except the joys of a fortnight's cruise round the Balearic Isles in Larry Hinchcliffe's yacht. I got drawn into this wretched business only because fate decreed that I should choose one particular compartment on the Calais train.

There was only one other fellow in it, a smallish man in a neat dark blue suit and a black slouch hat, and he was already working on a pile of invoices when I got in, so I took him for an ordinary business man. Then, just as the train was about to steam out for Paris, there was a terrific commotion in the corridor—train conductors, porters, Cook's men, luggage, and a girl.

I suppose I should say 'woman' really, since she couldn't have been under thirty. She had on a little hat which showed off her hair to perfection—bronze gold with a tinge of red in it, but her eyebrows were her really striking feature—long, thin, and tapering, they curved up like the moustaches of a musketeer. I didn't know then what had upset her, but she seemed to be in a towering rage and her face was as white as a sheet.

She stood there in the doorway telling the crowd what she thought of them. Her French was appalling, and I doubt if they understood one-third of what she said. They seemed half apologetic and half surly as they stowed her baggage on the racks and seats.

When they had gone she suddenly put one hand to her tummy and half closed her eyes. I thought she was going to faint and made

a move to steady her, but she shook her head and sank into the other corner on the same side as myself.

As the train moved off she sat up and turned a large pair of angry eyes on me. "You are not French?" she said.

"English," I answered, gazing back. Her eyes were a queer tawny colour flecked with green.

Then she looked at the other fellow, "And you, monsieur?"

"Norwegian," he told her with a little bow.

"*Ach, Gott sei dank*—these French are horrible," she exclaimed.

She was an unusual type and obviously intelligent, so I inquired her nationality, although it was already pretty certain what it was.

"I am a German," she shot at me with an angry lift of her chin, "but I might be a leper from the way they treat me here. You speak German perhaps?"

I nodded and she broke into a violent diatribe in her own tongue. She was on her way back to Germany apparently and should have caught the train that left ten minutes earlier than mine. On account of her nationality the French had put her passport aside to be dealt with last, and gone through her luggage with a tooth-comb. In consequence she'd missed her train and, worse, her sleeper on the Berlin express. That meant she'd have to spend a quite unnecessary night in Paris, and her long tapering eyebrows went up into her bronze-gold hair as she scowled over the iniquities of the French. To crown it all, she said, she was only just recovering from an operation and hardly fit to travel—yet, in spite of that, they'd kept her standing on the platform in agony for over half an hour.

The Norwegian had been busy with his papers all the time, and when she suddenly swung on him and asked: "Do you not also think it is disgraceful of them?" he looked up with a puzzled stare.

"Excuse please, *Fräulein*—my German is not much." So she turned back to me exclaiming: "*Ach!* I feel so ill."

I suggested that she might like to put her feet up, and moved over to the other side of the compartment to give her room; for the first time her face broke into a smile.

"What about a little cognac?" I went on. "I've got some in my bag—it will do you good."

Those curious eyes lit up her face in an extraordinary manner as she thanked me, and I got out my flask. Then she gave me another little smile—said she would try to rest a little, and wriggled down to her full length.

After that I sat staring out of the window for a bit—somehow I'd lost all interest in my book. Then I began to study the Norwegian in an idle way.

I had been facing him before, but now that I could see him in profile it struck me that there was something familiar about his face. It was his nose that reminded me of someone—a long, thin, knife-like affair, but for the life of me I couldn't think where I'd seen a beak like that before.

"*Ein bischen mehr Brantwein bitte?*"

It was the girl speaking of course, and I fumbled for my flask.

"More brandy?" I asked stupidly. "Oh yes, of course—here you are." I gave her the cup, but my mind had flashed back fifteen years to a hovel in the slums of Cairo. Those very words had been spoken then by a man whose nose was the twin of the ugly proboscis in the corner.

The girl closed her eyes and I was free to regard the pictures in my brain. Essenbach had given us endless trouble in the old days, fermenting discontent all over the Levant. Towards the end of the war a chap, whom we'll call Manning, and I had run him to earth in Cairo. He fought like a devil when we cornered him, but Manning broke an earthenware pitcher over his head, and it was while we were bringing him round that he asked for more brandy.

He broke prison, and got away—the Armistice came soon after and I hadn't heard a word about him since.

I took another look at the 'Norwegian'. His build was right. Then I glanced at his hands—and that settled the matter. Hands are a marvellous index to character, and almost impossible to disguise—this bird was Essenbach all right.

I should have assumed him to have been out of the game for years—just like myself, but the story about his being a Norwegian set me thinking. He had come from England—and he couldn't have been up to any good.

In the hope of a line I looked up at his luggage and I saw 'Felixstowe' on a railway label at one end of his bag.

Well, Felixstowe is only just across the water from Harwich, you know, but somehow there didn't seem much to interest a German of Essenbach's standing there. Then I got another idea: what about Martlesham, the R.A.F. experimental station?—a much more likely spot than Harwich for picking up really important information.

The woman with the intriguing eyebrows sat up as we passed through Amiens. She was looking better for her nap, and after powdering her nose settled herself in her corner and started to chat.

I soon found that we had certain friends in common, mostly among the old ex-officer class in Berlin, and I began to wonder who she could be, but I couldn't lead her on to talk about herself at all.

We had slowed down and were rumbling through Asnières before I realized now time had flown, and in another few minutes we were all collecting our things.

I don't mind confessing that I should have liked to follow up my acquaintance with that interesting young woman, but I couldn't even offer to see her to a taxi—I had Essenbach to attend to.

I passed the barrier a good twenty yards ahead of him, and got under cover in a taxi before he appeared in the station yard.

He had a good look round before he jumped into a cab. I tapped on my man's window, and we set off after him down the Rue Lafayette. We nearly lost him at the Opéra, but spotted him again in the Rue de la Paix. As we entered the Place Vendôme I saw that he had pulled up at the Ritz.

I made my chap drive on through the square and then round to

the back of the hotel—the entrance to the bar. I paid him off and walked slowly down that endless corridor lined with show cases. I wanted to give Essenbach time to register before I appeared. As I poked my nose round the corner a page was leading him to the lift. I went over to the desk and asked for a room, but I'd hardly spoken to the clerk when I heard a soft voice behind me, and there was the lady of the tawny eyes and intriguing eyebrows.

She gave her name to the other clerk as Fräulein Lisabetta von Loewring, but I hadn't time to stop and talk to her.

Five minutes later another taxi set me down at the gates of the British Embassy. I walked through into the courtyard and entered the block of office buildings on the right. I was in luck. The office staff had gone of course, but little—well, let's call him Harvey—was still there.

"Well, Thornton," he grinned at me, "glad to see you—take a seat."

"Know who's come in on the boat train?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Kurt Essenbach," I told him.

"Essenbach?" he repeated. "You mean the chap who went Bolshie after the war and then returned to the German service in 1925? That's interesting—we haven't heard a thing about him for the last two years. What's he up to now?"

"That's your job—not mine," I told him, but I mentioned the Felixstowe label and suggested Martlesham as a possibility.

"I'd better get through to London," he said, and in a few moments he was talking to someone round the corner from Whitehall. When he put down the receiver his face was grave.

It seemed that I was right. Two days before one of the draughtsmen on the civil side had disappeared from Martlesham. Steady fellow—been working there for eighteen months. Essenbach of course—taking his time. The police had failed to trace him, so they set a watch on the ports and got our people to put a man on every boat. He'd slipped through at Dover, but the service man had picked him up half-way across—spotted the Felixstowe label—careless that, for an old hand. Anyhow they had wired from Calais and were following him to Paris.

I learned too that Essenbach had been working in the special room because one of the seniors had gone sick—just the chance he'd been waiting for—and although the blue prints were intact it was a hundred to one he'd got a set of tracings from the diagram of our new Fighter. It looked serious to me.

Harvey said that a special man had been sent over by plane, and in the meantime the chap who had spotted Essenbach on the boat would be sitting on his tail.

I felt a bit sick that I hadn't known they were on to him earlier—having hurried to the Embassy had spoilt my chances of what might have developed into something interesting, and as I stood up I told Harvey casually of my meeting with Fräulein Lisabetta.

He was on me like a flash and cursed me for not having mentioned

her before. You see, no first-class espionage man ever holds anything a second longer than he need. There is nearly always a messenger to meet him somewhere and relieve him of his stuff. I had left the compartment for a few moments just before we reached Chantilly, so anything might have happened then, and if I hadn't been so rusty I should have thought of it before. Harvey was insistent that she had been sent to meet him, and when I thought it over I felt it was ten to one that he was right.

"We've got to get her, Thornton," he said sharply. "You see that, don't you. Our people are after *him*, only you and I know about her."

Well, I didn't like the job a bit, so I suggested that he should either get in touch with the London men or call in the French.

He told me that I ought to know that all London agents report direct—not to him, he wouldn't know them if he saw them—and that they didn't even know each other. As for the French, we were up against them just as much as all the rest in these days. If they laid hands on those tracings they would photograph them for a certainty before they passed them on to us.

"Why not get on to London again?" I asked. "Tell them what we suspect and they can instruct their people over here."

"But, damn it, man, you know the woman already!" he protested. "Look at the lead you've got—give her some dinner somewhere. One of the porters at the Ritz is on my Paris list—he'll search her room while she's with you."

I didn't like the idea, and I said so, but he began to plead with me.

"Now look here, Thornton; this is really serious. If those tracings reach their destination they may do us untold harm. This woman's got to be separated from her luggage for an hour or two—and it's up to you."

Well, it was a service matter and I had no alternative but to give in, so I told him I'd telephone if I could arrange it.

My talk with Harvey hadn't lasted more than twenty minutes, so I was back at the hotel under half an hour, and directly I reached my room I sat down to write a very formal and guarded note. I felt that was the best line and I was right.

Ten minutes after I had sent the letter to her room she telephoned; said how kind it was of me to think of her—that she was feeling better and would like to dine, provided I did not mind that she was not permitted to dance afterwards—then she asked what restaurant I suggested.

I mentioned one or two and we settled on the Tour d'Argent.

I took the opportunity of securing her room number by inquiring at the office which room I had been talking to, and I found that she was next to Essenbach—on the same floor as myself. That settled it in my mind that they were acting together. You see, it is so handy to have another room near your own into which you can slip, when you are liable to be beaten up at any moment.

I told Harvey what I had done; and he asked me to ring him again at a Passy number before I left the Tour d'Argent. He would have heard by then from his man at the Ritz.

When the Lady Lisabetta joined me in the hall an hour or so later, she looked more charming than ever.

I should have enjoyed that dinner if I hadn't known what was going on behind the scenes. In the war, of course, I'd become hardened to dealing with the actress-courtesan type who dabble in espionage, but this was a woman of distinction, so you can imagine how I disliked the false position I was in!

After we had finished dinner I excused myself for a moment and got Harvey on the 'phone. "Well," I asked, "all serene?"

But it wasn't—his man had drawn blank at the hotel, so she must have the goods on her, and my heart sank like a stone. You see, I knew what was coming next before he spoke.

"You know the drill?" he said.

I knew the drill all right, but I told him I couldn't do it—he must send one of his Paris people along to take over—but he protested that anyone who didn't know her wouldn't have a chance—and wanted to know what sort of midsummer madness I was suffering from.

Then of course I realized where I was drifting. If she had been old and ugly it would never have entered my head to kick at being asked to take the usual steps. As it was, I just hated the idea, but I had to go through with it.

"All right," I agreed reluctantly, "where?"

He told me he would send along a man in a red muffler and black cap to pick me up.

When I rejoined her I suggested another ration of the Old Original Chartreuse. I wanted to give Harvey's man time to reach the Tour d'Argent, and as we weren't going on anywhere she agreed, so we sat there for a bit drinking that marvellous liqueur, which the old monks made before they were kicked out of France. I lit another cigarette and endeavoured to make amusing conversation, but it was a poor effort. She pursed up that big generous mouth of hers with a humorous look and accused me of having spotted someone more attractive than herself when I went out to telephone.

I laughed it off, of course, but I was glad when I felt enough time had elapsed to send for the bill.

Outside on the doorstep I had a quick look round—Harvey had done his job and there was the taxi. The driver's language was a joy as he wangled his cab in front of two others—I recognized him immediately by the cap and muffler.

She didn't notice that we had veered away from the direction of the Ritz until we crossed to the Place de la Concorde. Then she gave me a sharp look and asked where he was taking us. I apologized blandly enough—said I'd forgotten it before, but a friend of mine had asked me to deliver a letter personally in Paris; as I was leaving very early next day I'd thought she wouldn't mind if I dropped it on the way back that night.

She sank back in her corner with a little shrug, and I smothered a sigh of relief at her acquiescence—at least I had escaped the wretched business of holding her down for the rest of the journey. You see,

I had the rotten job of getting her to a certain house where we could commit the quite illegal act of having her searched.

A few minutes later the driver gave a sharp toot on his horn and swung the cab through a pair of big gates into the courtyard of a private house.

I got out and ran up the steps, the frosted glass door was opened almost immediately—Harvey stood waiting for me in the hall.

"Got her?" he asked at once.

I nodded. His lined face lit up with one of those rare smiles. "Good boy," he said, "bring her in."

I waited a moment, then I went out again and spoke to Lisabetta, told her a story about a business deal in which we were all interested—that the chap who owned the house wanted to write a note for me to take south, and pressed her to come in for five minutes while he did it.

She leant forward, and I just caught her smile in the light from the open doorway. "Colonel Thornton," the eyebrows rose—"this is Paris—a strange house—and it is late! But I think it would be amusing to trust you!"

A fat, motherly old person showed us into a room on the ground floor. Harvey was standing in front of the fireplace—and he wasted no time in formalities.

He said straight out that he was there to safeguard certain interests of his Government. That he knew she had travelled from Calais with a man named Essenbach, who was in the German Secret Service, and that she must hand over anything with which she had been entrusted by him.

As I watched her face I saw a barely perceptible tightening of the mobile mouth. She knew that she'd been trapped, and she swung round on me.

"So it was for this that the kind Colonel asked me to dine? What a humiliation, and what foolishness on my part to assume that it was gallantry!"

Harvey had the grace to say that I had been acting under his instructions and that it was a service matter. Then he told her firmly that unless she did what he asked he would have her searched.

"I know nothing of Essenbach," she flared. "If you detain me here I will complain to my ambassador."

He explained to her quite patiently that it wouldn't do her any good. The house was taken furnished, and it would be untenanted five minutes after our departure.

Then she threatened to have me arrested by the police, but Harvey had her there again. He'd fixed an alibi for me with half a dozen of his friends—a card-party at a private house.

"Search, then!" She threw a contemptuous glance at me. "Search—but you will find nothing."

Harvey put his finger on the bell and the fat woman appeared in the doorway. I held the door open for Lisabetta and she left the room without a murmur.

I took out my cigarette-case, but he refused to smoke and stood there drumming on the mantelpiece with his finger-nails.

The stout woman came in again—she had a glorious Cockney accent. "She ain't got a thing on 'er, Mr. 'Arvey, sir."

Harvey frowned and asked her if she was dead certain.

"Sure as my old man's in 'Eaven," she piped, as she held out a bundle of silk and lace for his inspection. "Look fer yerself, Mr. 'Arvey, sir."

We waived Lisabetta's garments away impatiently and asked how she had taken it.

"Like a lamb she did," said Phoebe. "I never 'ad the undressin' of a nicer lady, and 'er undies is that fine they must 'ave cost a fortune—not like some as we've 'ad 'ere!"

"Better take her back her things," he told her; "we shall have to keep her here a bit."

Old Phoebe grinned at him. "Very good, Mr. 'Arvey, sir—I'll make the pore dear a nice cup o' tea—jest to cheer 'er up like."

As the door closed I chuckled to myself. The comic relief afforded by that old woman had been a godsend in such a trying situation, but Harvey turned on me with an angry stare.

"For God's sake don't laugh—it's a damned sight too serious," he snapped.

He'd been on the 'phone to London an hour before, and they were in a flat spin. It seems their first man had reported Essenchach's arrival at the Ritz and been told to go off duty at eight o'clock. You see it is very essential to change the shadow, otherwise you arouse the suspicions of the bird you're after. The second man should have been there to take over, but he'd been forced down by engine trouble near Folkestone and he wouldn't be in Paris till next day. In the meantime Essenchach wasn't even under observation.

That sort of breakdown doesn't happen often, but it is one of the snags in our system that no agent is supposed to know another by sight. If number two had had to report to number one, the first chap would never have gone off duty till the second turned up—still, accidents will happen, and the moment I understood I was looking every bit as worried as Harvey.

"There's only one thing for it," I told Harvey at last, "the old direct method. Telephone your porter to leave a pass-key to Essenchach's room on my writing-table. I may have to wring his neck, but I'll get those tracings somehow."

We arranged that I was to take half an hour's start. I reckoned that would be ample time to do my business—then Lisabetta was to be blindfolded—put in the taxi with Phoebe, and dropped at a quiet spot at the top end of the Tuileries Gardens. She couldn't come to any harm there, and could either take another taxi or walk back to the Ritz.

When I got to my room at the Ritz I found the pass-key on the table, so I changed into my bedroom slippers at once and tiptoed out into the corridor.

Essenchach's room was on the opposite side and about six doors down. The lights in the passage were at half-cock and not a sound broke the stillness. I passed Lisabetta's empty room and slid the key

gently into the lock on Essenbach's door, it turned without a sound—then I pressed, and the door gave a trifle.

With a final shove I slipped inside—then crash! something hit me on the head, and I was sent spinning to the floor. The thing was on top of me—a great weighty object, pinning me down. I tried to struggle out from underneath it, but before I could get to my knees I got another crack on my skull.

The second blow knocked me silly for a moment, and I just wriggled feebly on the floor while a pair of quick hands ran over me. I was still half stunned, but I tried to grab my adversary's throat. Then, with a sudden sickening jab, he thrust his knee into my stomach.

That finished me and by the time the pain was easing a little he had lashed my arms firmly to my sides.

The light clicked on, and there was Essenbach peering down at me—fully dressed. He had shut the door, and I saw what had knocked me endways the first time. It was a giant booby-trap—a Heath Robinson affair, but efficient. Half the furniture in the room had been used to balance a heavy steamer trunk which was bound to crash on the head of anyone who opened the door more than a foot.

Essenbach took up a hefty automatic, complete with silencer, from the table by his bed and pointed it at me. Then he said that he had been expecting my visit for the last two hours. Like a fool it had never occurred to me that his memory for faces might be as good as mine!

I struggled into a sitting position with my back against the wall, but he tapped his automatic and his eyes bored down into mine, so I had to leave it at that.

Then he began to talk in fierce soft whispers about the old days of the war and afterwards. His eyes never left my face as he told me quite calmly that he meant to do me in. He meant to ensure that I should never interfere with his future activities by recognizing him again.

Well, as you can imagine, I had the wind up pretty badly, and I felt my only chance was to scare him into clearing out at once. So I told him he could do what he damned well liked with me if he chose to risk his neck—but he'd be far wiser to get out while the going was good—the French were after him and I'd only beaten them by a short head. Of course he didn't believe me, but it was the best card I had. Some of the old hands at the Sûreté knew him as well as I did, and if they had the least suspicion that he was in Paris with anything worth pinching on him, they would have arrested him on some trumped-up charge and searched him.

I told him that I'd been talking over his exploit with another of our people half an hour before at the Cercle Etrangère when we thought we were alone. Then, I said—as we left the room I'd spotted Moreau buried in a deep arm-chair. Moreau is in the Ministry of the Interior and I knew that Essenbach would know his name. I only had to add that as I left the club I'd seen Moreau hurrying to a telephone box, and I had him properly scared.

He didn't waste time talking, but jerked me to my feet and started

to search my pockets. A second later he was flourishing the key of my room in my face. "Walk," he snapped at me, "to your room *Herr Oberst*—and no noise!"

The muzzle of his pistol was jammed hard in the small of my back, and my hands were still tied firmly to my sides, so there didn't seem much option but to obey.

He shoved me inside my own room and shut the door behind him—then he had the cheek to ask me how long I thought it would be before the French turned up. I lied like a trooper, of course—swore they would be there any moment, and urged him to destroy the tracings before he was caught. After all, they would have been more dangerous to Germany in the hands of the French than to any other country, and I thought I might bluff him into destroying his own handiwork.

He considered that for a moment, then he shook his head. "No," he said suddenly, "I will keep them—also I will get away, but first I must make you safe—lie down."

Well, I could quite understand that he didn't want me chasing him down the corridor and I patted myself on the back for having bluffed myself out of a pretty desperate situation.

With as good a grace as possible I sat down on the floor while he secured my feet with a sash from the curtains—after that I thought he would make a bolt for it, but I found I had badly underrated his fear of the French and intense personal hatred of the English.

He seized my by the collar and dragged me across the floor to my bathroom. I didn't even struggle because I thought he was only going to lock me in, but not a bit of it—he took the cord off my dressing-gown and started to make a noose.

Can you imagine what I felt like then? I realized with a horrible suddenness that he really meant to do me in. I sat on the floor there thinking desperately—racking my brains for some idea that would literally—save my neck. I began to talk again—quickly, feverishly, of the first thing that came into my head, anything to gain time—although how that would help me I didn't know, for the French were nothing but a myth! I told him about Lisabetta and how I'd wasted the evening leading her into a silly trap.

He stopped his preparations for a moment and stared at me with those cold eyes of his. "So," he said, "you were not then at the club?"

I saw that I'd blundered badly, but I faced it out—swore that I'd gone there after, and that if he doubted my story he had only to wait for Lisabetta to return.

Perhaps I was mistaken, but I thought I saw a sudden flicker of interest in his face, so I babbled on—it was a case of seizing any straw that might serve to turn him from his purpose.

"There's a chance for you," I said. "She'll be back in twenty minutes—you can hide in her room from the French—No. 582—it is next to yours, and she wouldn't give you away in a million years—only hurry or you'll be too late."

His only reply was to stoop down and seize me by the nose—then with his free hand he thrust a sponge into my mouth. That ended

the conversation, of course, and I could only flap helplessly about on the floor like a fresh-caught salmon on the bank.

He slid the cord over the hook on the door—fixed the noose round my neck, tested the knot—and then began to hoist!

God! it was a horrible business. I dug my chin down into my chest as hard as I could, but I felt myself being drawn up in steady jerks.

Suddenly I left the ground and the cord tightened round my neck—the hook hit me on the back of the head as he gave a last heave on the cord—and there I was, dangling in the air while he lashed the end of it to the door-knob.

He supported my weight for a moment while he undid the cord that bound my hands to my sides and the curtain sash that tied my feet—then he let me drop.

The second my hands were free I was clawing at my neck, but the noose was tight about it and I couldn't get my fingers in. I couldn't shout because the sponge was in my mouth, and even when I wrenched it out I could only gurgle horribly.

Through a haze of pain and dizziness I could see Essench as he stood there studying me with cold deliberation. Then he tipped the bathroom chair over just out of my reach and I heard him say:

"Suicide—suicide of Colonel Thornton." After that he left me.

Well, there's one piece of advice I'd like to give anyone who is thinking of committing suicide: *Don't try hanging yourself!* It's a damn sight too painful.

*To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes
Is delicate and rare,
But it is not sweet with nimble feet
To dance upon the air."*

Remember?—Wilde's poem about the man in the condemned cell, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', wasn't it? Well, that's what I did less than a month ago in Paris. Look!—you can still see the mark about my neck.

I soon stopped dancing, though—some glimmer of sanity must have penetrated the pain, and I realized that the more I jiggled the more the noose tightened round my windpipe.

The cord had stretched a little, and I found that as my legs hung slack I could just touch the floor with the tip of one toe. It wasn't enough to bear my weight, but it eased the strain a fraction.

I knew then, as I hung there with the blood drumming in my ears and my eyeballs straining out of their sockets, that I had just about ten minutes to live. I couldn't see the bathroom any more—the pain became excruciating—and I fainted.

Thornton stopped talking suddenly and stooped to examine a flower-bed, leaving me breathless.

"Good God! Thornton," I exclaimed, "you're lucky to be alive. What in the world saved you?"

"Lisabetta found me and cut me down," he said casually.

"Lisabetta?" I said, puzzled. "How did she come to be in your room?"

He answered my question by another. "What would you have done if you'd been in Essenbach's shoes—expecting to be arrested by the French, and desperately anxious to save your papers?"

"Hidden them," I suggested, "or taken a chance by passing them on to someone else."

"Exactly—when Lisabetta got back to her room she found him there. As one German to another he begged her to get them through. The second he'd gone she came across to me."

"I still don't understand," I murmured.

"Don't you?" his blue eyes twinkled in the sunshine. "*She* was our agent who spotted him on the boat, and she only played the Hun in the train on the chance of getting to know him. It's one of the rules of the service that even if your own side gets up against you through ignorance you must never show your hand until your job is done. A necessary convention for some occasions, perhaps, but in this case it nearly cost me my life."

■

STORY II

I NOW PRESENT A COMIC—AT LEAST THAT WAS MY INTENT. THIS IS also one of my earliest attempts at portraying character by dialect. I soon learned that Americans 'don't talk like that' or Scotsmen, or Cockneys or Jews. At least, they say they don't, however skilfully their idiosyncrasies of speech are rendered by much more able pens than mine.

Whether that is so or not one fact may be noted here for such readers as aspire to authorship. The British public, and even more so that of the United States, do not like books in which the main characters speak in anything but plain English. However well done it may be, dialect hangs up the reader, and a really accomplished author should have the ability to indicate the origins of his people by more subtle yet quite unmistakable means.

Dialect is sheer hell to write, anyway, so why spend hours of agony wrestling with the vowels and consonants of a single sentence when the result is to give umbrage to potential 'faithful readers' who happen to be Irish, Lancastrians, or even Etonians, and at the same time bore others with the unnecessary distortion of normal speech.

Bollinger is so unquestionably one of the few consistently great champagnes that, having read this story, no one, I feel sure, will infer that the drinking of it normally makes people 'see things what they didn't ought'. I must have consumed at least a lorry load of Bollinger in my time and never met a headache in a bottle of it—except, yes, once. But that was in a rather queer spot in Madrid, and the Bollinger wasn't Bollinger, although it had the temerity to call itself so with the curious and sinister sub-title of 'Green Stripe'. However, I'm a little older now, and the whole of that rather hectic episode is quite another story.

BOLLINGER—VERY DRY

As we lounged under the awning on the deck of the Nile boat we had an excellent view of the Temple of Karnak.

Later we were to go ashore and inspect the famous Hall of Columns—that wonderful monument to the greatness of an ancient people which has defied alike the buffets of the elements and the neglect of man for close on four thousand years. Naturally, everyone was talking of Egypt and the Egyptians.

The girl with the protruding teeth and soulful eyes leaned towards me: "How wonderful it must have been to live in those days," she lisped, "to know the men who planned these marvellous buildings—I am sure they must have had great minds."

"Perhaps," I said. "Life must have been jolly uncomfortable, all the same."

"Oh, no, Mr. Waverley," she answered me earnestly, "think of the ease and luxury in which Cleopatra lived"; she sniffed, and her rather bulging eyes yearned for the romantic. "Life must have been wonderful then—so different from this dull and sordid age of commerce."

That genial American, Mr. Benjamin P. Hooker, twisted his cigar in the corner of his mouth as he cut in: "Say, young lady, these ancient fellows weren't all they're painted—no, by Gee."

She gave him a little superior smile. "They have left their monuments to speak for them, Mr. Hooker—they must have been great men."

"I'll not say they weren't great men," agreed the American, "but you can cut out all the milk and honey stuff—right now, take that from me."

"Oh, but dear Mr. Hooker, everybody knows that the Egyptians were a most cultured people—the Courts of the Pharaohs were magnificent."

Hooker twirled his cigar adroitly with lips and tongue. "I guess you're all wrong," he drawled, "though I've no personal knowledge of those Pharaoh men."

"If you read Budge and Flinders Petrie, Mr. Hooker"—there was a trace of asperity in the girl's tone—"you would be better qualified to talk upon the subject—if you like I will lend you a little book——"

He shook his head. "That's sure nice of you, Miss Burrigge, but I don't take much stock in books—still, the way I figure it out, these Egyptian guys would be about on a level with the Carthaginians as far as culture goes."

"What have the Carthaginians got to do with it?" I asked.

"Say," he laughed, "have I never told you folks about my little trip to the ancient and honourable city of Carthage—there was a mighty powerful people, if you like."

"No," I said, "but Carthage was destroyed hundreds of years ago, even the ruins have disappeared in the sands."

"Maybe," he nodded, "but I've been to Carthage way back in the centuries, all the same. I'll say it's a queer yarn, but I'll hand you out the story if you like?"

The stout gentleman and the elderly Scottish lady drew their chairs a little closer, and, in an accent redolent of the great cities of the Middle West, Benjamin P. Hooker went on:

"Well, it was this way—me and the Professor man were quartered in the same hotel way outside Algiers. An' me bein' a citizen of the United States, which is entirely synonymous with a seeker after knowledge, it was nohow surprising that I should cultivate that little old man.

"Say, folks! he was a marvel, and no mistake—I guess there was mighty little he didn't know. He could tell you the time the moon got up—or the way to make a peach-gin slosh; he knew how many wives Mahomet had—and why the emancipation of women weren't nohow possible in the Bismarck Isles. Yes, Sirr—he was a compendium of Ten Thousand Facts, and a History of the World throughout the ages, done up in one.

"So when he came to me one morning bright and early with a smile like a churchwarden at a baby-wettin' on his face, and suggested a trip to the ruins of Carthage—I grabbed the opportunity like a parson does the collection.

"I put it up to him that I'd figured on going myself that same afternoon, and I'd be mighty glad if he'd take a seat in the automobile I'd rented for that purpose . . . I hadn't—no, Sirr—that was just my way of lettin' the old dry-as-dust know that the exes. were all on me.

"Well, we hit the trail for what was left of Carthage City with a packet of *foie gras* sandwiches and a couple of bottles of Bollinger—very dry. That Professor man sure knew a heap about fine wine, and I'd already tumbled to it that he yielded up his store of knowledge easier under the pleasant stimulus of alcoholic beverages.

"Have you ever been to Carthage? No? Well, it was some city, let me tell you, an' mighty interestin' I found it. I doped the brain-box, and he was as chatty as a political agent on election day. He handed out the highbrow stuff in doo proportion as the Bollinger went in.

"I sat down in the shadow of a hunk of wall, but that little old professor man was here, there, and everywhere, poking about among them ruins with a bit of stick, as active as a two-year-old. Suddenly he gives a yelp of joy and comes running up to me; he had a chunk of somethin' in his hand. I gave it the once over and it looked like broken pottery to me, but he was as delighted as a nigger kid that finds a dime. About six inches long, it was, and all done over with pothooks and hangers—that was writing, so he said—*Cu-ne-form*, I think he called it, and I took that piece of nonsense in my hand.

"Now, folks—this is what gets me beat—it's Benjamin P. Hooker speaking—and I'm on the level—what I'm going to tell you is a stone cold fact. *When I looked at that tablet thing I found myself reading that cu-ne-form stuff as easy as A B C.* Yep, you may stare, but it wasn't fancy, and what's more that artistic piece of ancient calligraphy was addressed to me!

"It's a fact—believe you me, I certainly thought I'd got the sun for a moment, but it was all O.K. There was the Professor man, and the Bollinger, very dry, and there was yours truly sopping up the *Cu-ne-form* just like he'd been raised to it in Kansas City.

"It was what they call a Billy-doo, I reckon—fixing a date for that very evening with a little bit of fancy goods down in the street of the Melon Sellers. That street in ancient Carthage was just about what Broadway is to us. She was a sort of nun, too—well, priestess you might say—anyhow, I was having some hectic affair with that little girl—and I found we was well acquainted, too. You mayn't believe it, but at that moment I could see her just as plain as I see you. A prettier piece of trouble never took me for a sugar daddy, and that's saying some.

"Well, I'll tell you, the idea of that date with the candy kid got me all hot and bothered—I was just dippy about that girl, then I looked up, and what do you think I saw? There wurn't no Professor

man, there wurn't no Bollinger, very dry. I thought I'd gone loopy all of a sudden—but I didn't have much time to figure it out. Standing just in front of me there was a great big burly guy, with a curly black beard, all rigged out in a little silk shirt waist, and shiny brass armour. He spoke to me in some lingo unknown—Punic, I reckoned it to be—but I understood it O.K.

"Say, boob, what in heck d'you think you're doin' here?" he said, or words with that same meaning.

"Well, I certainly thought I had as much right there as him, so I started in to tell him where he got off.

"Say, Mr. Movie Man," I said, 'you ain't bought these ruins, have you? I'd just hate to detain a busy coon like you—but you sure spoil my view.'

"He didn't seem to get that any, and he says: 'You get to hell out of here up onto them ramparts—that's your home from home. Now shift!'

"Then I had another look around. Golly, but I got some shock. Them ruins had clean vanished and Carthage stood there just as it did before the flood. Villas, temples, public squares, and the whole caboodle—but my immediate attention was centred on that brass-clad stiff.

"Just batty with rage, he was. He up with a horrid looking cat-o'-nine-tails and lammed me over the shoulders with it, like Bab Ruth hits the ball—Jiminy, but it made me hop. It was just about then that I tumbled to it—that I'd lost my pants. Instead I was all swell and dandy in a little cotton frock—just like a Sunday school kid. Sure—you can laugh, all right—I laughed a bit myself at first, but not for long—no, Sirr. It dawned on me that Old King Cole in the tin rig-out was a Carthaginian Cen-too-rian, and I was a Sammy in his little bunch. Crikey! I can feel that cat-o'-nine-tails now. He ran me back to those ramparts, laying on like hell all the time, and cussing me for bein' fresh with him—me, a Barbarian mercenary. Yep! that's what I was—I'd been and landed slick in the middle of one of them Punic wars.

"When I got onto them ramparts I found lots of other guys all rigged out like me. Every colour under the sun they were, and a Roman camp way over opposite.

"It was no picnic on that wall, I'll tell the world; those Roman stiffes were busy doin' the evening hate stuff on us poor bums. Arrows flying in all directions, there were, and lumps of stone which fellers were hurling with a kind of sling. A great buck nigger come up to me and slapped me on the back. 'Come on, yo' skate,' he yelled. 'Lend a hand at dat dar bar,' and he pushed me towards a bunch of flats who were hauling on a kind of capstan thing. I got busy, and Lordy—didn't I sweat. We were winding up a powerful big catapult affair with a lump of rock the size of a Ford car in it; say, you should ha' seen that morsel fly—up in the air it went—and down, down, down—slick into the Roman camp way over.

"Believe me, friends, we just don't know what war can be. About fifty of them Romans got busy with a long sort of ladder. They ran

it against our wall, then up they shinned like monkeys up a tree, and that buck nigger he yelled at me: 'Hoi, fat face—dis ain't no toime fer put an' take, get busy wiv da molten lead.'

"I looked around, and there were some fellers hoisting a cauldron on long iron bars. I lent a hand and we got it on the wall. 'Let it rip, Bo,' yelled the black, and we tipped it over the side.

"Talk about a nightmare—I thought I'd been took, and gone to hell. Half of 'em were roast like pork chops, and the rest fled screaming, like the Pollak women at a death, on the lower East Side.

"One bird had got up on the rampart and another was left clinging with his fingers to the wall. They downed the first chap and pushed him in the catapult. Up he went like a catherine wheel, all arms and legs. I tell you he travelled some, ninety miles an hour back to his pals. And the other young buck—a greasy-looking Greek went up to him, rammed a dagger into both his eyes, and kicked him off the wall. I nearly threw a fit, I was that het up!

"Yep, it wern't no free lunch for tired workers, but them Romans had had enough for the time being, and most of my outfit got down off the wall. The Cen-too-rian didn't seem to want us any, so I thought it about time to make my way up town—ye see, I wanted to have a look around, and find out if I was Benjamin P. Hooker, a respectable citizen of the U.S.A., or a barbarian mercenary in the pay of these murderous Carthaginians. I had all the instincts of the one, and all the trappings of the other—if you take my meaning.

"Funny, though! I knew my way round that little old burg, all right; yes, Sirr, an' seein' it was cocktail time, I recollected the date I had with that priestess kid—so I hit the trail for the Street of the Mellon Sellers.

"Well, I hadn't gone more than a couple of blocks when I saw a real interesting example of what Carthaginian culture could be; trussed up away over against a row of columns was a line of Roman soldiers—prisoners of war, I guess, and in front was a hoary old bud, dishing out arrows at three the quarter to a bunch of women and kids. Merry as a New York holiday crowd on Coney Island, they were; an' every one that hit a Roman got another arrow free—but if they killed him it was a dollar fine. I figured it to be the original of the Aunt Sally game.

"D'you know, folks, such a real powerful thing is the business instinct that I darn near put up a proposition to that bird 'bout making a corner in the arrow market; then I came to again, thought of wiring the League of Nations about it as a gross infringement of international law, but there wern't none, and I recollected I'd be late for my date if I didn't hustle.

"I found the little bit of soft goods, all right; she was some baby, and no mistake. This Carthaginian business didn't seem so bad, somehow, when she was around, and she let on that it was part of her religious duties to entertain a stranger to the town. We beat it hand-in-hand to the Temple of Astoroth—it seemed she hall-roomed there, and she gave me the pass right in.

"Well, I'll say it was some dive, that Temple. There were lots

more cuties just like mine, and all the swell boys of that ancient village seemed to have happened along.

"It was a cross between a cathedral on Christmas day and a gala night at the Ziegfield Follies, if you get my meaning; lots of incense and chanting—they had religion bad—but the dancers! They were some good-lookers, all right. You certainly didn't have to ask why little Fanny left home, either, when you saw those Carthaginian dandy boys standing treat right and left. We've got nothing to touch it in little old Noo York; and that's goin' some.

"Well, the Mother Superior came and handed us her blessing—in return for which same piece of politeness I begged her to accept a contribution to the Temple funds, and the moon-faced cutie took me along to her hall-room.

"Now, people, I'd just hate you to get any wrong ideas of Benjamin P. Hooker—I'm pretty highly thought of in my home town, and I'm a banner-bearer in the Brothers of the Spread the Word and Lift the People Movement, but this thing was different. I was living two hundred and fifty years before the Christian era—see? So there wern't no word to spread—anyhow, I'm tellin' you the facts just as they happened to me.

"There was only one fly in my ointment that night—she asked me what I'd take to drink, and I got stuck. I wanted to say, 'Dry Martini.' I tried that hard I thought I'd burst something, but would you believe it, there ain't no word for dry Martini in the Punic tongue. I had to make do with some sweet muck instead—like orangeade gone alcoholic.

"But to get along, I hadn't been more than maybe a couple of hours sayin' how-de-do to the candy kid when the curtain was pulled aside—they hadn't got no doors. A great big burly, hook-nosed guy, all tricked out in clinky plates of gold comes in—say, he certainly was some swell—I figured it out that he must be some big noise in the sacred Legion gang; it seemed I'd got his pet girl.

"'Get out o' here,' he said to me. 'Come on, you mutt—beat it.' I tell you he handed me the frozen mitt, all right. But I wasn't handin' in my interest with the cutie that way. No, Sirr.

"I said, 'Get out yourself!'

"He scowled at me like a senator who's mistaken for a hotel clerk. 'Swine—skunk—pigface—hedgehog,' he yelled at me. 'Get to hell out of here before I throw you out.'

"Well, I got up, and I reckon I was abusive some—then I planted him one right on his ugly face—yes, Sirr, slick on his nasal organ. After that things sure began to hum; the big boy called for his flunkey men, and in they came, about a dozen of them. I hadn't a darned earthly—I kicked one in the region of the solar plexus and bit another in the leg, but there wern't no hope from the beginning for yours truly.

"They ran me out of that Temple dive in no time and along the street to the Palace of the Suffet—he was a kind of chief magistrate they have.

"That Suffet was a beery-looking guy—a cross between a Sheenie and a Wop. They trussed me up like a Noo Year's goose, and threw

me on the floor before his sitdown as if I were a sack of flour. My friend of the tinplate readymades coughed up his yarn quick enough, but not a darned word would they let me say—no, Sirr—they kicked my shins every time I tried to open my mouth. I'll tell the world there wern't no sort of justice about that place at all.

"These Barbarian guys sure get more fresh every day," said the Suffet man. 'Shove him in boilin' oil'. It's a fact what I'm tellin' you—and if that's culture, you can cut me out.

"Then a lean, cadaverous-looking rube got up; he had a bright little suggestion of his own to make.

"Take a pull, nunc," he says to the Suffet man. 'Have him flayed alive instead; he sure has a nice white skin, and I want another to finish off my book.' Can you beat it?—he wanted my skin to finish his blasted book!

"Well, that young Carthaginian highbrow gave the word to the guards and they undid my bonds. I wasn't slow to attain an upright position, you may guess, but he started in running his finger up and down my spine. 'Say, nunc,' he cries, all gleeful, 'I could write five thousand words on this guy's back—let me have him.'

"Now, I wasn't goin' to let that bunch of stiffes take my skin without a struggle, and a vague sort of notion came to me how the Professor man had said that the ancients regarded the mad folks as sacred—sort of inhabited by the gods—so I tell you what I did. I started to dance an American can-can right there around that so-called hall of justice in the hope they'd figure I was daft.

"I never got wise to it if that brainwave fetched them, for all of a sudden pandemonium broke loose—that place became like Wall Street on a settling day. Folks burst into the hall hollering for all they were worth, 'Make your get-away, boys—the Romans are coming—beat it right now.'

"I tell you, people, I didn't wait for no special invitation—all them clever dicks were behaving like they'd gone potty—runnin' round that hall like chickens does when you come in to pick one for your Sunday dinner. I managed to trip the literary gent who'd took a fancy to my skin, and the others trampled on him, they were that anxious to get out. After that I struck a side door and got into the street.

"Crikey, what a picture—them Cathaginians were footing it in all directions—and down the street came the Roman Legions, eight abreast. There wern't no stoppin' 'em. Shoulder to shoulder, their shields held up in front and torches lighting up their armour. They had taken the little old burg of Carthage by surprise, and no mistake.

"Say, I was almost sorry for those Carthaginians—it was a merry little hell for them. Tough as they were, them Romans wern't no better; they hacked and stabbed with their little short swords, the blood ran ankle-deep down the side-walk; yes, Sirr—they sacked that town good, proper and complete.

"They beat up every Temple and Palace in the place—looting and killing as they went. I saw one guy with half a dozen ropes of pearls strung over his arm, and his hands cram full of precious gems. The

inhabitants were slaughtered wholesale by the light of the burning houses—they didn't spare the women, either; they ripped off their purple raiment and flung 'em into the flames—they didn't even spare the kids: they were throwing them off the rooftops and out of the windows for the other guys to trample on in the streets below. I just can't recount to you the horror of that night in Carthage."

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"What happened to you?" I asked curiously.

Benjamin P. Hooker shook his head. "I guess I wasn't killable, somehow. I managed to fight my way back to the ramparts, and I happened on my old nook by the wall. I sat down to take a spell, and my hand fell on that tablet thing I'd had earlier in the day. As I picked it up the whole place faded out, and I heard the Professor man say:

"'You'll excuse me, Mr. Hooker, but if there's anything left in that bottle, I'm just a trifle dry.'"

"You must have passed into some previous existence," said the girl with the protruding teeth.

He nodded. "Yep—that's what the Professor man seemed to think—but it may have been the sun and the Bollinger—Very Dry."

"You had hypnotized yourself?" I suggested.

"Maybe," said Mr. Hooker, "but it was a damn sight too realistic for me to wish I'd lived in those days—give me this dull and sordid age of commerce *every time*."

STORY III

A BOOK CALLED 'MEDITERRANEAN NIGHTS' IS QUITE UNTHINKABLE without a tale about Monte Carlo in it; and, although the series as originally planned was never completed, this at least was ticked off on my list quite early in the game.

On reading it through after a period of years I am a little disappointed to find that it is mainly about love and gamblers' luck instead of spies and sinister adventure; and that it makes little attempt to portray Monte Carlo as I first knew it. Those were in the days when something of the glamour which attached to it before the first World War still lingered there. The Grand Dukes who had thrown fantastic parties in the Monte of their youth had returned as 'elderly' men not yet accepting their exile as a permanency, and therefore not yet adopting obvious petty economies. The famous Greek syndicate still gambled impassively in thousands each night at the Sporting Club. Monsieur Fleurie, that Emperor among *maîtres des hôtels*, still dominated the scene at the Hôtel de Paris and dispensed to his most favoured patrons the world-renowned old brandy from his *Caves* in Burgundy-shaped, crested medallion bottles. The great yachts of the Duke of Westminster and Lord Furness lay with a score of others in the blue bay. The diamonds in the bracelets which flashed upon the arms of the women in the Salle de Jeux at nights were not *ersatz*, as they afterwards became, but real jewels worth fifty times the price of the gambling plaques scattered upon the green baize of the tables.

I am so glad that I saw it all when I was young; because last time I visited Monte, in the summer of 1939, it had fallen into a state of sad decay. Twenty years had changed such of the exiled aristocrats as remained into poor seedy folk, many of them haunting the bars with what was pretty clearly the pathetic hope that some 'old friend' or even a chance acquaintance would offer them a really enjoyable free meal. Most of the yachts had gone, and with them the millionaires, to playgrounds farther afield—South Africa, Miami, the Bahamas, Santa Catalina, Bali, and the South Seas. The women in the rooms were no longer great ladies or splendid courtesans; they were just respectable middle-class women or shoddy little hussies casting anxious, hopeful glances at each man who entered the door. In the square before the Casino there was a row of buses doing a good trade in taking crowds of indifferently clad tourists in and out from Nice and Cannes, to spend a few hours in the golden acre where once the last heirs of a vanished world of nobility and elegance had strolled with leisured peace enjoying the midday sun.

And now? But let us not think of poor Monte Carlo as she must be to-day.

This story was offered to one or two editors, but they displayed no interest in it, so it was thrown aside, and appears here in print for the first time. On re-reading it I make bold to suggest that those

editors might have found a better use for their rejection slips. Admittedly the yarn is light, but hangs together well and it possesses that very rare virtue, so difficult to achieve in a short story yet so eminently desirable—a double twist.

BORROWED MONEY

SALLY watched the croupier rake in her last red plaque. She opened her handbag and looked inside, although even as she did so she knew that it was useless. A handkerchief, two lipsticks, and four francs seventy-five centimes. She shut it with a snap.

She looked at the double tier of faces round the table, and noticed with a little shock how hard the eyes of the women had become, how abrupt, and almost rude the manners of the men. Monte Carlo madness was upon them—the veneer of courtesy and kindness with which they conducted their daily lives had dropped away; the naked lust of gain showed openly as they watched the spin of the Roulette wheel, or lay beneath lowered lids as they sat with assumed placidity. Not one of the players evinced the slightest interest in her ill-fortune—only the dark young man, who had stood looking on for the last hour from the other side of the table, displayed any understanding. She caught his eyes—he was smiling at her now.

Sally was just a little bewildered; everything seemed to have happened so quickly. At half-past nine she had had before her piles and piles of plaques, of different shapes and various colours, representing several hundred pounds. It was now barely eleven, and every one of them had disappeared. In ordinary circumstances she would have looked quickly away from that young man; half-dazed as she now was she found herself looking straight into his brown eyes. Then she realized that her schoolgirl habit of making faces had betrayed her. Her eyebrows slipped up and her mouth slipped down into a half- rueful, half-humorous smile.

"*Pardon, Mademoiselle*, you play no more?—I may then 'ave your chair." It was a Frenchman behind her speaking. As she stood up he settled himself eagerly—it was his lucky seat, and he had been waiting for it for an hour.

Sally moved away from the table. The dark young man stood before her. "A glass of champagne and a breath of fresh air on the terrace is the only thing," he said, smiling into her eyes.

She regarded him gravely, she had recovered herself a little now. "I'm afraid I don't know you," she said coldly.

"Of course not," he laughed, "but unlucky at cards . . . you know." He suddenly went scarlet. "I say—I didn't mean that—I meant the other way on—lucky for me!—no, I didn't, I mean . . . hang it all I don't know what I do mean—you must think I'm an utter fool, but honestly I didn't mean to be impertinent—just thought I might be able to cheer you up a bit."

He was so obviously embarrassed that Sally could not help feeling sorry for him. But for his blunder she would most certainly have

do with your mighty flutter—is it that two thousand that you’ve just done in?”

Sally nodded gravely, it really was a comfort to talk to this nice young man. “That’s it,” she said, “you see I’m nearly twenty-two and I had to make some arrangements for the future—you can’t live on a hundred a year—at least I can’t, but two-fifty is different. There’s a little cottage outside the Park that’s going quite cheap, and I’ve got an idea that I could write a bit. If I could have turned my two thousand into five I could have managed, but that’s impossible now. I suppose it’s charity with Aged Aunt, or some rotten job in London.”

“You’ve quite made up your mind not to marry Cousin Henry then?”

“Quite.” Sally viciously jabbed the butt of her cigarette in the ash-tray. “I’ve never seen him and I don’t want to. I’ve hated the idea ever since I was old enough to think. What makes me so furious is that I had such marvellous luck in my first week, by the fourth night I was up seven hundred pounds.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she broke in quickly: “If you say ‘beginner’s luck’ I shall cry—or go home to bed!”

“All right, I won’t,” he smiled, “but all the same, if I played I’d always follow anyone who was new to it.”

“It must have been just about the time when you turned up that I started to lose,” she said, then mentally kicked herself as she realized that she had admitted noticing him in the rooms.

Sally knew that he had seen her slip, but he did not charge her with it. Instead he leant across the table and said earnestly:

“Look here, if my presence has been responsible for your bad luck, it’s in my power to change it yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me lend you a few *milles*.”

Sally turned away her head. “No thank you,” she said, a trifle coldly.

“Please,” he begged. “I don’t mean a big sum, nothing that you couldn’t repay by selling an odd piece of jewellery or something.”

“I thought you were urging me just now not to gamble any more?”

“I was—I should be still if you had any money left. In any case you can’t hope to get your two thousand back, but you might pick up a bit—borrowed money always brings luck.”

Sally was thinking quickly. She had been so certain somehow that to-night she was going to make a pile. Not to-morrow night, which would be her last in Monte Carlo, but to-night. There was that old ring her godmother had left her—it must be worth quite a lot. During her stay in Monte Carlo she had unconsciously absorbed the atmosphere of superstition with its talk of ‘lucky days—unlucky seats—charms, systems, and amulets’—it was not the first time that she had heard that saying, ‘Borrowed money is lucky’. What if there was something in it after all?

“One *mille*,” she declared suddenly, “one *mille* and no more. If I lose it I’ll send you the money from England, if you don’t mind that?”

"Of course not." He finished his champagne and stood up. "Come along and get some chips." They changed the thousand-franc note at the *caisse*, and he handed her the plaques. Sally chose a table that she had never played at before and secured a vacant place near the croupier. The rooms were crowded now, but there was little noise, only the quiet calling of the croupiers, and the click—click—click as the ivory ball rattled in the wheel of fortune. The cigar smoke hung heavily in the close, still air—the covered lights threw their brilliance on the baize-covered table.

At first Sally played carefully, and as is usually the case when care is brought into the game, found her capital diminishing in dribbles. Then she came home on a number—that heartened her and she began to play more freely. The game swung first one way—then the other; but whenever she got up to a *mille* in addition to her borrowed money she went down again; then, when she had been playing for about half an hour a long run on her slender resources began—she found herself reduced to a bare nine plaques.

"Go for a number," he advised, leaning over her shoulder, "it is your only chance."

"All right," Sally agreed, smiling, "neck or nothing this time." She chose the number seven and covered it—one in the centre, one on each side, and one on every corner.

"*Rien ne va plus, Messieurs, Mesdames,*" came the soft call of the croupier; the little white ball was jumping from slot to slot in the slowing wheel—it hesitated, then dropped into number seven.

Where Sally's nine plaques had been were now the equivalent of one hundred and forty-five. Unsmiling, the croupier flicked them towards her with his rake. She drew them in, setting aside the ones of higher value. Again she covered the seven—again it won; the croupier threw her two big plaques and a number of smaller ones. She shifted to number eleven, but ten turned up—her *cheval* brought her seventeen and her corners eight apiece. With her loss of six, she was twenty-six to the good on the turn. Next time eleven turned up, she was on it still and had won again. A little murmur of excitement ran round the table. For the next two spins a higher number won, but with the third the luck came back to the lower figures once more; she was on six, and two was called. After that the luck seemed to settle in the lower dozen—in half an hour she won six times on her numbers, and every second spin her *cheval* and corners more than covered her bets. She had increased her stakes now and was putting on maximums every time. A little crowd had gathered to watch her play—her stacks of plaques were growing rapidly. She had a bad period after that first brilliant run of fortune, for about twenty minutes, but it made no serious inroad on her winnings. The luck came back to the lower numbers and she won three times on number six.

Suddenly she stood up. "I'm going to the *louis* table," she declared, gathering her piles of plaques together. "My chance has come." He did not attempt to stop her, but moved quietly at her side. For a few minutes she watched the higher play at the new table without

making any bet, then she leant forward and plastered the seventeen. It was a spectacular entrance to a spectacular game. As though to welcome her the little ball clicked into seventeen—the middle dozen at the higher table favoured her, just as the lower numbers had before. Time after time her bets came home—steadily the chips of higher value mounted in three piles before her.

People began to follow her luck after a while, but she began to dodge about the table and the luck always followed her choice.

At half-past two the croupier spoke to an official of the casino, and for a few moments play was suspended. Sally had accomplished the gambler's dream—more money had to be sent for—technically, she had broken the bank at Monte Carlo.

When the money arrived she still played on and added yet another hoard to her amazing winnings in the ensuing half-hour. At three o'clock the young man tapped her on the shoulder. "Time for you to stop," he said gently.

"Must I?" Sally looked up, her grey eyes shining with excitement. She felt that she could go on and on—that her luck would never change. "Must I?" she pleaded. "Just a little longer."

He shook his dark, attractive head, his firm mouth showed no relenting; she got up slowly from the table. "We'll cash them in," he said, and began to stuff the plaques into his pockets.

Sally turned to the croupier and gave him a *mille* note. With a charming smile and low, "*Merci—bon soir*", she turned and followed her fairy godfather to the *caisse*. Directly she left the table she felt how right he was to make her stop. Another half-hour and all that money might have melted away again; now it was safe—she had won a little fortune. Smiling, she watched him change the plaques into notes of high denominations. He was busy for quite ten minutes; as they walked away he held them out to her—a bulging, solid sheaf. Then he drew them back as he said with a smile: "Too much for your little bag, I'd better take care of them for the moment—you won't be tempted to change your mind about that cousin now." He split the bundle, pushing the two wads into his pockets.

Sally smiled back; she knew that the cottage was her's now—all through a *mille* of borrowed money. "Thanks," she said, "I'll get my coat, then if you'll take me back to my hotel we'll put them in the safe till the morning."

She was only gone five minutes—five glorious minutes of visualizing again those marvellous coups—those masses and masses of counters being pushed towards her—that great solid roll of bank-notes that was hers. What a perfect darling that young man was—how wonderful of him to have made her leave the table at just the right moment. If she had stayed she would be certain to have lost it all again; but when she came out of the cloakroom, that marvellous young man was no longer there.

For a few minutes Sally waited patiently, thinking that perhaps he was in the other cloakroom, but as he did not appear she described him to an attendant and asked him if he had seen her friend.

"No, no one like that had gone in." She hurried back to the

Salle des Jeux, he was not there. She tried the bar—perhaps he was having a drink; no, it was nearly empty. She was frightened now. Just supposing that nice young man was not all he seemed to be. She had always heard that Monte Carlo was full of swindlers attracted by the large sums of money constantly changing hands; but he was much too nice—it simply couldn't be that he had gone off with her money! She bit her lip as she scanned the faces of the people in the rooms and corridors—with angry eyes she hastened to the *caisse*.

Almost before she had made her complaint she was surrounded by polite officials. The system of the Casino is very highly organized—there are strange stories of secret passages in the walls, through which the body of a suicide can be carried within a moment of the tragedy. Certain it is that on the smallest sign of trouble from a demented loser, a little group of men in evening dress gather unostentatiously around him, and hurry him away.

Almost before she was aware of it, a private door had been opened, and Sally found herself in an office. A bearded man questioned her quietly, others were sent for: the croupiers from the three tables at which she had played—the man at the *caisse*—the waiter at the bar.

Sally had to admit that she had been cleaned out earlier in the evening—that she did not know the man who had spoken to her—that he had cashed a *mille* note and handed her the plaques with which to resume play—that she had left the table at his order—that he had cashed her winnings and put the money in his pocket—and finally that she did not even know his name.

The bearded man shook his head. "It is with his money that you were playing, Mademoiselle. It is, of course, at the discretion of a lady if she chooses to speak with a gentleman she does not know, but such a practice is dangerous. I learn now that this monsieur left the Casino immediately he parted from you—I fear that there is nothing which we can do. May we place an automobile at your disposal to take you to your hotel?"

"No," said Sally furiously, "I will walk."

"As Mademoiselle pleases—a most unfortunate affair." He escorted her to the doorstep of the Casino.

She shivered as she walked the short distance to the hotel through the deserted streets. What an utter fool she had been! He had offered her the notes quite casually, why hadn't she taken them and given him back his thousand francs—or ten thousand if he had wanted them? Gone now was the cottage with the pretty little garden—only Aged Aunt remained, or the alternative of going every day to some stuffy office and living in a poky flat in London.

A sleepy night-porter took her up in the lift to her room. She felt terribly tired and disheartened; abandoning her usual care, she flung off her clothes hurriedly, brushed her white teeth, and tumbled into bed.

Sally woke early after a night of fitful dreams. She dressed at once; there was just a chance that she might catch that man, and it was not her way to accept defeat without a struggle. She set out to make a tour of the hotels.

At each one she described him to the commissionaire, or rather endeavoured to do so—but all she could say was that she was looking for a gentleman of medium height—dark hair parted in the middle—brown eyes, a kind, firm mouth, and a pleasant smile—that was all she could remember, but there must be dozens such figures in Monte Carlo, and none of the hall porters she questioned could give her any help.

All day she roamed wildly up and down the principality from the Café de Paris, with its umbrella-covered tables, to the Rock of Monaco—from the pigeon-shooting stands to the steps on the harbour. A dozen times she followed unsuspecting men, only to surprise them by peering into their faces to discover that she was once more mistaken. Many of them seemed quite prepared to enter into conversation, for Sally was an attractive girl, but she had turned her back before they could speak to her. At one time she had two of them following her, and once to her intense disgust a gendarme cautioned her—high and low she sought, but all in vain.

She returned to her hotel worn out and late for dinner; even Aged Aunt came out of her lethargic calm to inquire into the cause of the girl's distraction.

Directly dinner was over Sally darted off to the Casino, and, taking up a position in the vestibule, stood watching the arrivals with anxious eyes. After a time the bearded official came up and questioned her; she pulled herself together sufficiently to talk to him quietly. He made it plain that she would be allowed to remain only so long as she caused no disturbance—at the least sign of trouble she would be put out into the street.

Sally sat there till the muscles of her neck grew stiff with the constant turning of her head in her anxiety not to miss the features of a single man, but all to no purpose. At half-past two she gave it up, returned to her hotel utterly exhausted, and cried herself to sleep. The following day she was on her way back to England.

Sally sat brooding in her sanctuary at Mallowhayes. It was a little room in which she kept what she called 'her dirt'. There were tennis racquets, boxes of paints, knitting, books—a tambourine, and a hundred other odds and ends littered about.

The pale rays of winter sunshine filtered through the tiny panes of the mullioned windows; soon, all these treasured bits and pieces must be removed. Cousin Henry was coming down for the week-end. In a month her time was up, he would take possession, and out she must go.

With an impatient movement she wriggled out of her favourite chair. Cousin Henry would not be down till tea-time; she thought she would go for a run in her little car, the fresh air would do her good. She would have to be polite to the man anyhow—after all, it was not his fault that her father had made that stupid will.

She went down to the garage and got out the two-seater that Aged Aunt had given her as a twenty-first birthday present. She

drove slowly down the drive. There was another cottage near the one she had hoped to live in, just outside the gates; she gave the object of her affections a wistful look as she drove by, and failed to notice that a child had run out from the other house into the road.

When Sally saw the infant standing there waving a toy flag it was too late to pull up—a big car had swung round the corner on the other side—she must run down the child or swerve straight into that. She did not hesitate, but charged the Bentley. There was a grinding shriek as the brakes locked on, the tearing sound of metal, and with a dull crash the two cars came to a standstill.

Having given herself a little shake she found she was uninjured. She looked at the driver of the Bentley; his head was tilted forward on his chest, one hand hung, limp and still, over the side of the car.

Sally started up her engine and found to her surprise that she could back it away from the other. The steering felt a bit queer, and her lamps were smashed, but the bumpers of the two cars had saved a broken axle. She got out quickly and ran over to the other car. As she touched the driver his hat fell off—it was the man of Monte Carlo.

She was so surprised that for a moment she gaped at him. He was unconscious, and a little trickle of blood ran down his face from a cut on his forehead. The mother of the child who had caused all the trouble came up to her. "Better put 'im in your car, Miss, and take 'im up to the 'ouse," she suggested.

Together they got him into Sally's car, and in a few minutes he was being lifted out again. He was still insensible, so Aged Aunt superintended his immediate removal to the room that had been prepared for Cousin Henry while Sally telephoned for the doctor.

They bathed the wound and he began to mutter; then he sat up and looked at Sally—recognition dawned in his brown eyes.

Sally stared at him stonily; she was tempted to accuse him at once of having gone off with her money, but she felt she could hardly do that with a man whom she had very nearly killed a few minutes before. "You'd better not talk till the doctor's been," she said quickly. "You may have concussion."

He smiled feebly. "All right—I'm in no hurry," he said.

They left him to sleep, with Aged Aunt's maid sitting in an adjoining room to keep watch. Sally went downstairs. What could he have been doing, she wondered, outside the gates of Mallowhayes? The road was only a lane which led nowhere in particular. Perhaps he had been coming to return the money, but why, as he had bolted with it, should he do that? Then an extraordinary idea flashed into her mind. Could he—was it possible—that he was Cousin Henry? Had he known who she was all the time?—and kept the money deliberately with the idea of returning it to her later. Sally's heart began to bump as she thought about it. Her father's will—the place in Gloucestershire—she had told him all about that—he would have guessed who she was at once; she had even spoken of him by name, and said he lived in Canada. As she recalled her words Sally felt her cheeks grow hot. If this were true—what then? He was not the least little bit as her imagination had painted him—much nicer—ever so much nicer. Of

course, she could not marry him, but she was sure he would give her back her winnings. They would be neighbours—that would be rather fun, he must have money of his own—the Bentley seemed to indicate that. Sally began to walk quickly up and down, humming a cheerful little tune.

She was recalled to the present by the sound of wheels on the drive—the doctor perhaps? No—an antiquated station fly had pulled up outside the door. A long, lank, ginger-headed man emerged. He stood for a moment surveying the house with an interested stare. Sally was seized with sudden panic—who was he? what was he doing there? A sense of foreboding held her rigid; a moment later he was in the hall staring at her in a curious, unpleasant, apprising way—then he spoke. "You'll be Sally, I suppose—I'm Cousin Henry."

Tea was a ghastly affair, how Sally got through it she never knew. Aged Aunt came out of her shell and saved the situation. Sally had meant to be polite—she found herself boggling at her cousin, he was more awful than she had ever imagined; she did not like his socks, she did not like his tie, she liked his manners even less.

Just as tea was over the doctor arrived. Aged Aunt went with him to inspect the invalid. She was left alone with Cousin Henry.

He lolled back in his chair and without asking permission lighted a most unpleasant pipe. He gazed round him with a pleased, proprietorial air, then his glance rested on Sally.

"Well, little girl," he said in a nasal twang, "when's the happy day that we get hitched up?"

So he took it all for granted, did he? thought Sally. Well, she would show him—and in a few brief sentences she did.

Aged Aunt returned to find them flushed and silent. Sally quietly slipped away. "What a dreadful, dreadful man," she exclaimed angrily to herself. "It is a shame that Mallowhayes should go to a man like that."

She opened the door of the invalid's room; he was smiling cheerfully, propped up in bed. Sally sighed, he was really a most attractive person.

"Why didn't you tell me your proper name?" he said. "I had to hunt half round Gloucestershire to find you."

"Why didn't you wait for me?" she countered. "It was horribly unkind."

He laughed. "I didn't mean to let you have your winnings till you were safely back in England—on your last night you would have lost the lot."

"You brute," said Sally, but her voice was kind.

His brown eyes twinkled. "How's Cousin Henry?"

"Too ghastly, but I don't mind now—I can have the cottage."

"You can keep Mallowhayes if you want to—you're Sally Ashton, aren't you?"

"Yes, but whatever do you mean?"

"Your father made a mistake in that will—I've been to Somerset House and seen it—had it vetted by counsel, too." He paused to light a cigarette.

"Go on," gasped Sally. "Oh, please, please go on."

"You can marry anybody you like provided their name is Ashton. Cousin Henry only gets the place, and the hospitals the thirty thousand if you marry someone with a different name."

For a moment Sally's face dropped, then she smiled. "There must be thousands of Ashtons in the world—I could advertise in *The Times* and look them over, couldn't I?"

"You could," he said, and his laughing eyes looked deep into her grey ones, "but I'd like you to consider me as first applicant—my name's Ashton, too."

STORY IV

HERE WE LEAVE THE SUNBAKED OLIVE GROVES AND AZURE SEA TO come back to earth with a bump. And what a bump, since we find ourselves in cold and foggy London in the first winter of the Second World War.

I had just finished my first long spy novel, *The Scarlet Impostor*. I was doing a few odd jobs for various people but my regular war employment had not yet begun, so I was restless and dissatisfied. Mr. Bowler of the *Daily Sketch* rang me up to ask if I would do a series of six 1,000-word spy stories for him round a new character. I had not written a short story for years, but I was not ready to settle down to a new book, and a holiday was out of the question with a war going on—so I agreed.

It was my step-daughter, Diana Younger, who always used to do the covers of my books, that had the idea for the new character, and this was largely responsible for the little series which ran as *The Man with the Girlish Face*.

But it was my wife who provided the dénouement of the present story, which links it in a rather curious way with the last Great War. She was then married to a British diplomat stationed in Rome and she recalled the queer, sadistic pastime practised by an old Italian Marchesa of her acquaintance. To say more would spoil the story, but I have said enough to show that between Joan and Diana I can really hardly claim any share in this little masterpiece at all.

THE CRIPPLED LADY

VIVIAN PAWLETT-BROWNE was his brilliant father's greatest disappointment. At sixteen he failed to take his School Certificate for the second time, and at nineteen all hope of his getting into Sandhurst had to be abandoned; but old 'Frosty' Forsyth had an utter contempt for the examination system and he liked the boy, so he gave him a chance. Vivien became plain V. Brown on the register of the highly secret department that Sir Charles Forsyth ran, and henceforth began to receive instruction on many curious matters.

At twenty-six, with a private income of his own, Vivien exactly answered the description of a smart young-man-about-town. Tall, he walked with an affected stoop and was to be seen everywhere among that crowd of happy socialities whose only worry in life is what to do next. His lazy smile and brown eyes with their ridiculous curling lashes might have caused him to be thought effeminate, had it not been for his good jaw and strong, well-shaped hands.

It was early one Monday morning that Sir Charles sent for him and said abruptly: "Know anything of Lady Hoarding?"

"Nothing, sir; except that she's Sir Oliver's wife, a recluse, a cripple, and lives in Thurloe Square." Vivien's reply was prompt.

Sir Charles's chill manner always discouraged any superfluous remarks by his subordinates. It was that and his snow-white hair that had earned him the nickname of 'Frosty'.

"Well, she's German-born and facts concerning Sir Oliver's department, which only he could have known, have been getting through. I proved that conclusively this week-end. It's not him; he's a fool, but honest. So it must be her. But she never leaves the house and hardly ever receives visitors. Their telephone has been tapped, their servants tailed and all her mail passes through our hands, yet we've drawn a complete blank. I want to know how she is communicating with the enemy."

Vivien smiled slowly. "I'll find out, sir."

Outside the office he hailed a taxi and directed it to his flat in Green Street. For nearly two hours he sat with the *Medical Directory* open on his knees ringing up numbers in the Thurloe Square district. As each call was answered he said: "I've been recommended by Lady Hoarding; Doctor 'So-and-so' does attend her, doesn't he?"

At last when a voice replied: "Yes; Doctor Peters attends Her Ladyship," Vivien quietly hung up the receiver.

Half an hour later he rang through again and in a slightly altered voice booked an appointment for himself for that afternoon.

His interview with Doctor Peters was brief. He described some rheumatic symptoms with which he was not afflicted and after giving him the address of a masseuse the doctor wrote him out a prescription. Just as he was leaving, Vivien said casually; "By the by, you look after Lady Hoarding, don't you?"

The doctor nodded: "Yes, poor old thing—she's absolutely riddled with arthritis; has even to be lifted from her bed to her wheeled chair."

"What a life—I'd go crazy with boredom."

Doctor Peters smiled. "Oh, she manages to keep amazingly cheerful, looking after her tropical fish and translating books into Braille for the blind."

As Vivien left the doctor he was whistling thoughtfully to himself.

For three days a dirty, unshaven organ-grinder haunted Thurloe Square, his long-lashed eyes flickering continually towards the green door of Sir Oliver's house. His organ was too old and muted to attract unwelcome attention and nobody noticed him as he slipped down Sir Oliver's area steps early each morning to examine the contents of the dust-bin.

On the fourth day Vivien went to see Sir Charles. "I think I've got a line on the Hoarding woman, sir," he said. "Can you plant a special piece of information on Sir Oliver to-morrow—something that only he must know, and the day after, arrange to have the electricity cut off at his house from lunch time on?"

"Good boy," Sir Charles smiled his frosty smile, "I'll see that's done."

At a quarter to three, two afternoons later, a lanky electrician arrived at the house with the green door, was taken down to the basement, and having been shown the main fuse boxes was left alone. He lit a cigarette and undid his bag of tools. After messing around for a

good half hour, he called the butler and said: "I fink the trouble's on the first floor, mate; in the droin-room maybe."

He was ushered upstairs and into a large, sunny room; an elderly woman was there, seated in an invalid chair.

"The electrician, Your Ladyship," murmured the butler.

Vivien glanced slowly about him. The woman hadn't turned her head. She was leaning over the arm of her chair feeding her fishes with little pieces of spaghetti. They were in six low, glass tanks which completely lined one wall of the room.

"Why, there's another dead, Your Ladyship—that's four in three weeks," the butler said, peering down at the floating body of a Japanese goldfish in the nearest tank.

"Yes, it's the cold weather," Lady Hoarding replied, swivelling round to face him. "Take the poor thing away, Jenson."

As the man scooped it out of the water, Vivien grabbed his hand and shook the fish from it on to a near-by table.

"If you'll allow me——" he said disarmingly.

Lady Hoarding gave a startled gasp. "What are you doing?" she demanded harshly.

Vivien just smiled, pushed the scarlet-faced butler impatiently aside and slitting the fish open with his penknife took out a little cylinder of macaroni. Inside it was a tiny roll of paper.

"I thought as much," he said quietly, after one glance at the writing on it. "One touch of cyanide on a piece of spaghetti, the fish dies and comes to the top, your butler takes it down to the dust-bin and your outside agent collects it from there. Lady Hoarding, it will be my duty to place you under arrest for communicating with the King's enemies."

STORY V

HERE WE ARE BACK ONCE MORE ON THE SHORES OF THE BLUE 'MARE Nostrum', as Mussolini, 'in his well-known act as the swollen bull-frog of the Pontine Marshes', once termed it with insolent and baseless optimism. Taranto, Matapan, and a score of British naval victories, not to mention the splendid defence of Malta, have since pricked the bubble of his pride and taught him otherwise.

A portion of this story is set in Italy in the days when he was all-powerful there, and could never have dreamed that later his own stupidity and greed would reduce him to the sorry rôle of Hitler's whipping boy. The old Marchesa's estimate of him was, of course, based upon the prejudice of her class, and the fact should be faced that, during the seventeen years that he ruled in peace Mussolini made Italy a far more law-abiding and less smelly place than he found it, and performed that miracle without, apparently, interfering very much with the happiness of the average Italian. But I like the fiery old lady and her inconsequent, love-bewitched son.

The Hotel *Surmer* at Cavalaire, and its volatile little proprietor, Monsieur Gandini, are taken from life. That small white building placed upon a rocky headland between the pine-woods and a secluded bay has scores of pleasant memories for me. It is a perfect place to spend a honeymoon, and I had the good fortune to spend mine there. As for Gandini, he had been a *maitre d'hôtel* at the Negresca in Nice before he started in his own tiny place, and he could cook a *langouste* in a sauce of whipped eggs and Grand Marnier which rivalled anything that I have ever tasted. But when last I saw him, just before the war, he had left the house on the hill for a straggling bungalow right on the sands where they sift into the streets of the town. His object had been to cater for a larger, if not so exclusive clientèle, and he had succeeded. The place was full of French *petite bourgeoisie* in the strange clothes they consider appropriate to their hard-earned annual holiday *au bord de la mer*; fat, blousy women and screaming children. He cooked us a *langouste* according to his famous recipe as of old, but somehow, in those surroundings, the glory had departed. We left Gandini and drove back through the warm night a little saddened by what we had seen.

The story was taken by Mr. Heitner, who by some strange chance I have never yet had the pleasure of meeting, and published by him in *Britannia and Eve*. It was written about a year later than *Borrowed Money* which I, personally, consider a somewhat better plot; but by the time I wrote *Madame Ribereau* I had found my feet, and it displays, to my mind, a far greater ease of character drawing and sureness of touch.

THE NOTORIOUS MADAME RIBEREAU

I WAS a good bit older than Nero, but I had known him intimately for several years; you see, he and my younger brother had been at 'The House' together, and during his time at Oxford he stayed with us in Norfolk quite a bit.

Afterwards, too, whenever he came to England he always put in a little time with us at Denham Hall, and treated it as a sort of second home—which in fact we had encouraged him to do. That's why I had no sort of hesitation in proposing myself for a visit to his castle on Lake Garda when I decided in favour of an Italian holiday last summer.

Nero wrote back by return saying how delighted he would be to have me, and that I must stay much, much longer than I had at first intended. All sorts of interesting and amusing people would be in his house-party at the Castello Neroni, and he ended up with minute directions about the latter part of the journey. You can imagine, then, how surprised I was when I got off the train at the little local station to find no one there to meet me.

My Italian isn't too good, but once I managed to get it into the thick skull of the swarthy individual who did duty as station-master, signalman, clerk and porter, that I was a friend of the Count Neroni, he became all smiles and helpfulness—led me down the ancient village street—shook a tousled-looking peasant out of his afternoon siesta—helped him harness a knock-kneed horse into a rickety *carrozza*—and with a series of bows that would have done credit to an Elizabethan courtier sped me on my way.

It was a good four miles' drive along a twisting valley road with new vistas opening up as we rounded every corner. Lounging beneath the shade of the tasselled canopy while the old horse clopped along at a gentle pace, I wondered idly what sudden whimsy could be occupying the mercurial Nero's mind to the extent of making him forget to send his car for me.

We turned a sharp corner, and there below us lay the castle and the lake. The castle itself was a strange hybrid structure: a long, low stucco-fronted house with gardens running down to a little bay—behind it a mass of rambling, nondescript buildings obviously erected centuries apart—and there beyond, raised upon slightly higher ground, stood the father of all these queer excrescences—a good old fifteenth-century fortress.

My creaking chariot rumbled up to the pillared porch of the modern wing. The doors stood open and inviting, but there was not a soul about, and not a sound disturbed the drowsy silence of the afternoon.

The driver climbed from his box, and cupping his hands before his mouth, yelled lustily. A small and very dirty child ran out from another entrance, stared at me for a moment with wide frightened eyes and then ran in again. As I entered the cool shadow of the wide hall I wondered if Nero and his guests were sleeping through the

heat of the afternoon, or were out on some boating expedition across the lake.

Suddenly a small, bent old man appeared from behind some hangings. One glance from his sharp black eyes was enough for him to guess my nationality—he asked what he could do for me in stilted English. Immediately I enquired for the Count Neroni he clasped his shrivelled yellow hands and bowed deferentially.

“The Count lives for some time now in Verona, Signor.”

“Verona!” I exclaimed, “but isn’t he expecting me?” and then I told old parchment-face about my visit.

“It is not the Count’s pleasure always to tell us of his intentions, Signor,” the old man said gravely, “but Giuseppe shall go in the Fiat to inform him of your arrival. Verona is no more than thirty kilometres—in the meantime, gracious Signor, please to follow me.”

The old man led me up a broad flight of shallow stairs and along endless corridors to a pleasant suite of rooms overlooking the gardens and the bay.

I knew that Nero had spent a small fortune modernizing the house, so I was not surprised at the spacious tiled and chromium-plated bathroom, where I had a much-needed wash while a footman unpacked my bags, but I was a little startled when old parchment-face appeared again and asked if the gracious signor would refresh himself with a highball, a Martini, or a Bronx.

I punted for a highball, and when I came downstairs he served it with all the solemnity that would have done honour to Imperial Tokay. Then he left me in a spacious library where the shelves of old calf-bound volumes looked down on tables laden with modern periodicals and the startling covers of the latest detective fiction.

I settled down there to await the return of the truant Nero.

The roar of his great Isotta-Fraschini made me aware of his arrival minutes before he actually appeared, but the noise had hardly ceased with a grinding scream of brakes before he leapt in through the high french windows—tall, dark, smiling—overwhelming me with a torrent of apologies.

“Never could he forgive himself—a stupidity unpardonable—it was the 7th, and he had thought that I was arriving on the 17th—but no matter, it would give him ten days more of my delightful company—I would forgive him instantly if I but knew how great, how joyous, was the surprise . . .”

Well, for the moment I believed him—and who, woman or man—could ever refuse to forgive Nero anything! He called for drinks—and more drinks—took old parchment-face by the ear and pinched it affectionately so that even that living mummy smiled his pleasure at his master’s return.

We dined that night in state. The kind of state that is now only to be found amongst the great Italian families; a footman in full livery behind each chair, and two more at the serving table. A wine butler clad in black with a silver chain of office round his neck, and old parchment-face standing expressionless and immovable near the

door directing the service of his underlings by the occasional flicker of an eyelid.

It was a dinner of twelve courses, and although the food was of that rare category which we used to find in the great English country houses before the war, and which no restaurant can ever hope to emulate, I found it almost impossible to get through the meal, yet Nero ate of everything that was put before him with zest and appetite of vigorous youth.

Afterwards we strolled together in the gardens, enjoying the fragrance of our cigars beneath the cypresses that were etched black against a real Italian moon.

I listened principally while Nero made plans for my enjoyment of my visit. We would do this . . . that . . . and the other thing together—then suddenly he broke off and threw away the stump of his cigar.

"But you are tired, my friend—your long journey—how selfish I am to keep you from your bed—have we not to-morrow, and the next day, and the next—many days, for you must not leave me now that you have come. Let us go in, another drink—and then to bed."

Well, actually, although I'd had a longish day I felt that I could have walked all night in that soft clear air so far from the cities—but Nero waved my protests aside as mere politeness. Twenty minutes later he led me to my bedroom and was satisfying himself that, lest I should wake in the night, fruit, biscuits, drink, and the latest novels were all beside my bed.

By the time I sank into the great four-poster I was not altogether sorry that he had had his way; but you can imagine my surprise when the roar of the Isotta suddenly shattered the silence beneath the windows and I heard it thunder away up the hill, its echoes reverberating through the mountains until they died away into a distant hum.

The same sound woke me in the morning, but later when I came down to breakfast *a l'Anglais*, Nero said nothing of his midnight run and talked gaily of an expedition on the lake, so off we went together.

It was a heavenly day and the scenery was enchanting, but my enjoyment was ruined by the certainty that something was definitely wrong with Nero; he simply couldn't sit still, and at times his delightful chatter would dry up completely in a way that I had never known before. I hardly liked to ask him what was worrying him as he had ample opportunity to tell me if he wished. The boatman could not speak a word of anything but Italian.

That night we dined again in the same state as before, with the silent-footed servants throwing strange shadows on the arras as the candles flickered. It was then that he apologized in an awkward way for having no other guests to meet me. Once more his unpardonable stupidity about the dates—but no matter, in a week's time the house would be full of people—ten, fifteen—a dozen at the least.

Afterwards we sat in the great library and swapped reminiscences; but twice I caught him casting furtive glances at the clock, and guessing his intention from my experience of the night before I faked a yawn that he might have an excuse to suggest another early night.

My surmise proved correct. He jumped at the opportunity, and no sooner was I beneath the sheets than I heard his car burst into a roar, which quickly died away again as he sped along the twisting road through the valley.

He returned next morning, but later than before, and I was already dressed when I heard the first sound of his engine. By that time I had decided that something must be done about the situation. I was pretty obviously an unwelcome guest, and he was tearing himself away from Verona each morning to come and entertain me during the daytime.

Had we been in England I would have sent myself the usual telegram, but here—cut off from towns and villages by the rugged slopes of Mount Baldo—that was impossible. Plain speaking was the only way, and I took the opportunity just before lunch when Nero was showing me the view over the lake from the battlements of the old fort.

"Listen, Nero," I said, "it's been most awfully good of you to put up with me for the past two days, but I know that the mistake about the dates has messed up all your plans completely. We know each other quite well enough to be frank about things, so I propose to clear out to-morrow and leave you in peace."

"You have heard the car, of course?" he said.

"Yes," I admitted, "and I know you're dying to get away from here again, so why be stupid and pretend to each other?"

He pressed my arm gratefully. "I know—I feel so bad about this, my friend; but you are right—I must be truthful also. When this happened I put off my other guests—but yourself I forgot! How can I hope ever for your forgiveness?"

"Is it some trouble in which I can be of help?" I asked.

"No, no, that is nice of you, but it is personal this—I am what you say—head over heels in love!"

"A woman!" I exclaimed, and frankly I was a little annoyed at that. For all his English education Nero is pure Latin where women are concerned—I don't think he knows the meaning of the word 'Love'—they're just a penny plain and twopence coloured to him, and he has hectic affairs with at least twenty different women every year; so it struck me as a little thick that he should mess up my whole holiday for the sake of some new wench whose name he would have forgotten in a fortnight.

"Ah, but Santa Christina! What a woman," he took me up—"she is adorable—enchanting—I have gone quite, quite mad about her."

"Well," I said dryly, "I wish you lots of luck, but why the deuce didn't you ask her here with your other guests—you've got dozens of women among your married friends who would be willing enough to play the complaisant chaperone. I've heard you say that you've often done that sort of thing before."

"Yes, yes," he protested, "but this is different," and then he went on a little awkwardly, "you see she is French—and she is well, how shall we say—a little highly coloured, perhaps—and she has a

temper—oh, you do not know! she would make me scenes—terrible scenes. Also—well, I think it would be awkward for my other guests. Things will be different when she is my wife.”

“Your wife!” I gasped.

“Why not?” he said with a surly glance, “as Contessa Neroni she will be received everywhere, no matter what has gone before. Is it her fault that men have been brutal to her, poor child? As for that husband of hers—if I could lay my hands on him I would thrash him until he was dead!”

“So she is married into the bargain?”

“Yes, and what she has suffered! To think of it fills me with black, black boiling rage.”

“Now, look here, Nero”—I turned and faced him as he stood there, dark and handsome, with genuine tears welling up into his brown eyes. “As I understand it, you’ve run across a good-looking French-woman with a husband and a past, whom you dare not introduce to your friends—and now you talk of marrying her—is that the case?”

“No, no,” he spread out his hands in a quick gesture of denial, “she is of great *chic* and charm—as my wife she will take Rome by storm next winter.”

“What about this husband of hers?” I inquired.

“That brute! She will divorce him—proceedings have begun already, and I shall adopt the child.”

“Good God! So she’s got a child as well,” I exclaimed. “But look here—you’re a Catholic, aren’t you—how can you marry a divorced woman, anyway?”

“The Holy Father will give me a dispensation. I am a Papal Chamberlain, and have friends in Rome who can adjust such matters.”

I nodded. “And in the meantime you are living with her in Verona, I suppose.”

“Ahhh!” was all he said, but the way he raised his dark eyes to heaven was more expressive than any verbal admission could have been.

“Then why the deuce not carry on that way?” I argued.

“No, no,” he protested quickly. “I will make up to her for all she has suffered in the past. I have wronged many women—here at least I will make amends. Besides, each day in Verona it becomes more difficult—it is so small a town; already people are beginning to talk. When you have gone I shall bring her to the Castello Neroni—as my wife.”

“What—before you’ve even married her?”

“Yes—why not? I wish to be with her every hour of the day—every hour of the night.”

After dinner that night he begged my forgiveness again and again for the inconvenience which he had caused me, but made no secret of his impatience to get away—back to the arms of the Circe in Verona; and so we parted.

I spent the rest of the evening re-planning my broken holiday. Ten days, I thought, of doing the tourist round in Northern Italy would be as much as I could stand at a stretch—fond as I am of things

old and beautiful. Afterwards I would cross the Gulf of Genoa by local boat from Leghorn to Nice, and run down to the little *Surmer* Hotel at Cavalaire. A fortnight of real rest, lazing in the sunshine on the shelving rocks, would do me a power of good.

The next morning I arrived in Verona, and I purposely avoided the best hotel as I felt certain that Nero and the French houri would be staying there, so I thought it rather queer when, after lunch, the head waiter brought me a letter. It was from the Contessa Neroni, asking me to call on her that afternoon at her *palazzo* in the town.

Nero's mother, of course. I had often heard of the old lady, but never met her.

At four o'clock I duly presented myself, not without trepidation, at the great brown-stone house. I had a pretty shrewd idea that the old lady wanted to talk to me about Nero's affair with the French-woman, and I wondered how much she knew.

An elderly servitor, own brother to parchment-face, led me to a low room that took me back to the days of Leo X and Pietro Aretino.

At the end of that long room were three people: a scraggy, ageless, female who was stitching at a frame, a grey-haired priest who told his beads, and in the centre in a stately stiff-backed chair—an old, old woman.

She had an eagle face, witch-like and saturnine. Her piercing eyes stripped me to the soul as I advanced up that seemingly endless length of room.

One of the claws was held out imperiously for me to kiss, and instinctively I bowed over it as though I had stepped into another century. Then she waved me to a stool.

When she spoke it was in a curiously musical voice.

"You are the friend of my son," she said. "Many times have I heard how you entertain him in England. On your return you convey, please, my grateful thanks to your noble mother."

"Thank you," I said awkwardly. "Yes. Of course it's always been a great pleasure to have Nero with us—we are all very fond of him, you know."

She gave me a sharp glance. "I had thought that—you are older also—good for influence with him. Have you met this—er—*Madame Ribereau*?"

"No," I admitted, "but Nero has told me about her."

"That he goes to make her Contessa Neroni?"

"Yes."

The old eyes blazed at me out of the wrinkled face. "The notorious *Madame Ribereau*!—*une poule de luxe—une cocotte!* How can it be that such a woman should make wife to the Neroni? Have you not spoken sense to this mad son of mine?"

"I have," I told her.

Madame Ribereau, I learned, had been installed that very afternoon at the Castello as Contessa Neroni, and the old woman trembled with anger at this insult to her house.

Young men needed their adventures, she said; that was but natural—but how should this woman raise up children to an ancient race?

Twelve years older than Nero—married already, and utterly outside the pale of the black aristocracy.

I tried, out of loyalty to Nero, to put his case, and had it been the daughter of a local squire, or even an Italian peasant girl, I might have put it better—but a French *cocotte*, who was twelve years older than him—what could I say to support such folly?

At last she said that, as I had already done all that I could, she must make the journey to Rome. She, the Contessa Neroni, would humble herself even to speaking with that upstart journalist, Mussolini—who, people said, controlled all things in these strange days.

I expressed my sympathy, kissed the wrinkled claw once more, and left her.

The next day I spent in Padua, then I went on to Venice, where I stayed three nights; after that I came south to Florence, and it was there on the fourth and last day of my stay that I ran into Hummy Pringle.

I had never cared for Hummy much, although I had known him since he was a fat, unhealthy boy. His father had left him enough money to indulge his tastes in what he chose to call painting, and failing to receive any recognition in England, he had settled some years before in Florence.

I was sitting outside a café, and he bustled up to me at once:

"Hello . . . hello! just fancy seeing you here—how *teu* positively thrilling!"

I offered him a vermouth, but he wouldn't drink. "My figure, *yeu* know"—but he sat down quickly, avid for gossip of our mutual acquaintances at home.

Having satisfied his craving to the best of my ability, I gave him particulars of my days in Florence, and chanced to mention my brief visit to Neroni.

"My dear!" he gasped, "did *yeu* hear?—such excitement ten days ago—the Blackshirts beat him up!"

"What, Count Neroni?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, it was *teu*, *teu* thrilling. Of course, he's a real bad lăd—everyone knows that—and, would *yeu* believe it, he tried to marry a French tart!"

I nodded, and Hummy went on with his eyes popping out of a flushed, excited face. "Pretty ghastly, wasn't it—for the family, I mean? *Yeu* can imagine how they felt when he took her to Castello Neroni as his wife—all the aged retainers went into fits; but of course they couldn't do a single thing, and at first they didn't even know he wasn't married to her at all."

"But the family?" I asked impatiently. "What did they do?"

"Well, his old dragon of a mother intervened, my dear—went all the way to Rome and saw the Duce—can *yeu* imagine it? Of course, Mussolini is terribly hot-stuff on the aristocracy setting a good example—clean living, and all that—so he backed the old woman up and ordered a squad of Fascists off to Castello Neroni."

"What happened then?" I said quickly.

"Oh, they asked for the wicked Madame Ribereau, and when

Neroni said there was no such person there, only his new Contessa, they just laughed at him—positively roared, my dear—then there was a teu, teu ghastly scene. They tied him up to a statue of Venus in his own hall and went up to the lady's bedroom—told her she'd got ten minutes to pack—and they meant to run her out of Italy—Duce's orders.

"Then she had a screaming fit—started to yell the house down, and threw her make-up bottles at their heads. Anyhow, they got her out to the car at last, golden hair and all—and they put her on the boat that night at Leghorn, so she'll never come back to Italy any more."

"Maybe," I said, "but what's to prevent Nero following her?"

"Oh, but that's only half the joke," Hummy tittered in a way that made me want to hit him; "the old Contessa signed an affidavit that Nero was insane, so the Fascists have locked him up in a fortress until he gets over it."

"But they can't do that," I protested.

"Can't they?" Hummy sniffed contemptuously. "Yeu don't know your Italy."

Three hours later saw me on the boat at Leghorn, and the following evening I woke with the ship already at rest beside the quay in the little harbour of Nice. The P.L.M. took me to St. Raphael, and in the afternoon I chugged along in the snorting open local that links up the sea coast villages as far as Toulon.

Cavalaire is just about half way, and what with the heat and the smuts that is the worst part of the journey. I was thankful when it was over, and delighted to see Gandini waiting there to welcome me.

Monsieur le Proprietaire Gandini is a character. He fetches the food from the market in his ramshackle car, collects the post, and meets his visitors; superintends the cooking in the kitchen and the service of the meals on the charming little terrace, with its eight or ten tables, that looks right out over the bay.

No sooner had I got to the *Surmer* Hotel than I decided for a bathe in the private bay that lay there blue and tempting below.

As I clambered down the rocks were hot to my feet from a long day's sunshine, and the slanting rays were still warm on my skin.

By comparison the water was icy, but as I struck out it rippled warm and caressing over my shoulders. Two hundred yards out I turned to swim in again; then I saw the girl.

She was just round the point from the hotel, stretched out on a slope of rock that formed a tiny cove sheltered from wind and sight on every side except the sea. Quite naked, basking in the late afternoon sunshine. Slim and straight-limbed, her body a glorious golden brown—her hair a tumbled mass of yellow gold, sharp and distinct against the bronze of her flesh and the sandy colour of the rocks behind. A moment later she turned over on her side and caught sight of me—grabbed a pale blue wrap that lay beside her, drew it swiftly round her middle, and then sat up, her hands clasped round her knees, watching me swim in.

I clambered out smiling and a little breathless, shaking the water

from my hair. "Sorry," I said, "I'm afraid I've broken into your preserve, but unfortunately your haunt is open country to anyone swimming in the bay."

"It is all right," she smiled at me, "usually at this hour there is no one bathing so I have the chance to bake myself all over alike—but you were a long way away."

"May I sit down?" I asked.

"Why not?" she gave a little shrug, and then pulled her wrap up under her chin, "You have just arrived at the hotel, eh?"

"Yes," I told her, and then she said that she had only been there two days, but as we talked I discovered that she had stayed at Gandini's on a previous occasion and knew quite a bit about the surrounding country.

I found her broken English fascinating, and if there is one thing which is really beautiful in this world it is a blue-eyed Nordic woman whose naturally pink skin has been turned a rich golden bronze by southern sunshine.

"Well," I said at last, "I'm for a drink before dinner—what about making a move?"

She smiled again. "Yes, it is time—but you must go *first* round the corner; if I stand up everything will fall off—and now I think you are a little near for that!"

Of course, I laughed and left her, but she didn't follow me at once, so I had my drink alone—did my unpacking and then came down to dinner.

The girl—or rather woman, I should say, for I put her down as round about thirty—gave me a little smile of recognition as I passed her table, and I noticed that she was already half-way through her dinner. I saw, too, with sudden pleasure that she had a table to herself.

She naturally finished a good bit before I did and then went straight to her room.

By half-past ten I was in bed, sleepily glad that I had elected to visit that lovely spot again, and my gladness considerably enhanced by the knowledge that I was certain to see my bronze Venus on the following day.

I did, of course, after breakfast next morning—swimming like a graceful golden fish far out in the bay. I joined her and she did not seem at all displeased at my company; so we swam round the point together.

After our bathe I asked her if she would join me in a crayfish for lunch. It takes two to eat a crayfish—unless you are a pig.

I learned that her name was Madame Painlevé, and that she was recovering from a shock—something that only the peace and quietness of such a place could heal.

Next morning we went down in our bathing wraps to the plage on the other side of the headland—hired a canoe—and bathed from it in turns. Then we drank iced *Cassis* in the enclosure of the Grande Hotel.

The following day we went on an expedition to the old town of

St. Tropez, in its almost land-locked bay. A picnic lunch under the walls of the ancient fortress on the hill above the town—a stroll through the narrow, crooked streets—hot chocolate at the famous patisserie down by the harbour—and so back to Cavalaire in time for our evening bathe.

I'm thirty-five, and I suppose I've lived my life as well as most people, but I wasn't feeling a day over eighteen. I suppose love does get one like that sometimes. I was simply bubbling over with vitality and enthusiasm like any boy. We swam the cape together—three miles, taken by easy stages, round to the plage, and on the fifth night we were climbing the headland opposite the hotel hand in hand, to see the moon silvering the waters and shining mysteriously on the low islands that lie farther down the coast towards Hyères.

It is amazing how intimate in a single week you may become with a perfect stranger, and yet know nothing of their history. I gathered that there was a husband who had not behaved too well—she was trying to forget, and therefore had taken her maiden name again.

On the seventh night she received a letter which upset her. It was, I think, from her lawyer—some hitch which would delay her divorce going through—so she excused herself and went early to her room. I was not tired, so stayed for a while on the terrace drinking Cordial Medoc with Gandini.

It would never have entered my head to discuss her with him, but quite inadvertently I made a reference to her:

"Ah! Madame Ribereau—at least she call herself Painlevé now—" he shook his dark, clever head—"two young men went quite mad about her last year—and you also have, what you say, fall for her—is it not?"

For the moment I was quite speechless—I will confess that it was an appalling shock; for had she not received that letter and gone early to bed, I had meant that night to ask her to marry me as soon as her divorce went through. Somehow I kept the conversation going till we finished our drinks, and then I crept up to my room.

The Notorious Madame Ribereau—Nero's woman—it seemed impossible, and yet it *must* be true. The husband she had mentioned—and her divorce, the date of her arrival—the whole thing tallied.

Nero must be the "unfortunate experience" she was trying to forget. I don't think I slept at all that night.

What should I do?—tear myself away?—return to England immediately?—that seemed the safest thing. Yet never, since just after I left my public school, had I been so desperately attracted to any woman. At eight o'clock I flung the shutters wide, and there below on the rocks was that golden sylph-like figure—standing clear-cut against the sea, alone, intent upon an early morning bathe.

That day we had arranged to motor the few miles into Ste. Maxime to witness the little local *Concours d'Élégance*. Perhaps it was weakness on my part, but I decided to stay another day, that I might store my mind with memories of this extraordinary woman, so fair-seeming and sunny-natured, yet, if the old Contessa and Hummy were to be

believed, responsible for wrecking a dozen lives by her extravagance and deceit.

I would leave to-morrow on the morning train for Toulon—Marseilles—and safety in the quiet reaches of the Norfolk Broads.

We lunched together and after, in a hired car, drove through the pine forests to Ste. Maxime. The *Concours d'Élégance* had attracted quite a crowd. Some fifty cars, beribboned—polished—with their drivers clad in their smartest beach creations, drove slowly up and down.

The obvious winner was a great silver sporting Rolls, driven by a small, fair woman.

"Look—look—she has won, that one," cried my companion, as the judges hung a placard on the bonnet of the silver car, "I knew she would—it is always so."

"You know her then?" I murmured, my thoughts on other things.

"Of course," a rather bitter little smile parted the lips of the loveliness at my side, "she is my sister-in-law—the notorious *Madame Ribereau*; you must have heard of her; but to see her again has spoilt it here for me—let us go back to the *Surmer*: I wish only to be alone with you . . . Oh! please—what is it?—you are hurting!"

Well, I'm afraid I was—for my grip on that golden arm must have been a hard one as I hurried her away.

STORY VI

NOW FOR A BREAK. THIS STORY IS A PRODUCT OF MY CHILDHOOD and, as far as I can recall, the first I ever wrote. It had passed entirely from my memory until a kind aunt, who spoiled me delightfully when I was young, on learning of my success as an author sent me a copy of it as a curiosity, and a charming message that she had always treasured my first manuscript in the belief that I would write real stories one day.

On re-reading it I am utterly appalled at what was evidently my attitude to the coloured citizens of the Empire at that time. 'Black fools' hardly seems a polite, or even diplomatic way in which to address a crowd of high-caste Indian priests whom you have angered by breaking into the sacred precincts of their temple. However, I have changed not a word or a comma, and you may consider me a thoroughly nasty little boy, as I probably was, on this evidence.

In spite of all its absurdities, clichés, and shortcomings I believe that this early effort does in some respects show the embryo of the mind that has since had the great fortune to tell tales that have intrigued readers in every land. The genuine gusto for story-telling is obviously there; the prolongation of the fight for life foreshadows the many pages which I have since covered with such scenes; and the tradition of loyalty to a friend, however desperate one's situation, is already well established.

A word now to that carping reader who is never content. Don't write to me and say: "I paid so-and-so for this book. How dare you cheat me of a portion of the price I paid by padding it out with such balderdash?"

This story is put in free, gratis, and for fun. Without it the book is still longer than the average volume you would get for the same money, as is always the case with my books. Seven shillings and sixpence is the normal price for a pre-war book of 80,000 words; you may pay a shilling or two shillings more for my novels, but I give you between 125 and 170 thousand. Put that in your pipe, curmudgeon, and write to me no more.

I would also like to give away a little secret to aspiring authors who are still in their 'teens. I was not an infant prodigy of four when I wrote this boyish yarn of daring-do, but a comparatively sophisticated cadet in H.M.S. *Worcester*, aged fourteen. Therefore, however much your less sympathetic relatives may look down their noses at your first attempts screwed out with such pain and grief, take heart. If your stories are no worse than this there is hope for you yet.

THE SNAKE WITH THE DIAMOND EYES

ADVENTURES OF TWO BOYS IN CENTRAL INDIA

CHAPTER I

THE TEMPLE

"Hi Fred, stop a minute, look here, here is an old temple, looks a bit ancient, I guess its one of those that the old Buddhists or Mohameddians used to worship their wretched old idols in, still you can see no one has been near the place for years, let us have a look round, I want a rest for its still a good ten mile ride back through the jungle."

So spoke Harry Ronalds the son of Colonel Ronalds of the 4th Bombay Lancers, who had just come out from England, after having been educated at Eton with his chum Fred Manners to stay for a couple of years in India with his father, before entering the army. The Colonel, not wishing him to come alone, had invited his friend Fred to come and stay with him.

The two friends after a hard day's shooting in the jungle, had sent their native servant home with the game they had shot and were cantering away down a side track through the jungle which they thought would save them a couple of miles in the homeward journey, although the Colonel had often warned them against straying from the main track, but the two boys, being so certain that it would be alright, had disregarded the advice given them by the Colonel, and also Harry's faithful native servant Julawar, whom they had sent back with the hardearned game.

So the two boys dismounted and tying their horses by the bridles to the nearest bamboo, Harry lead the way through decaying pillars and ruined walls. After having wandered about for a quarter of an hour among the roofless halls and long passages covered in strange hieroglyphical characters, they came to a little opening in the floor and a flight of stone steps leading down into the earth. "Come here Harry" cried Fred "Look what I've discovered let us go down and see where it leads us to, probably to the grave of some of these people, come on, do".

"Alright" called Harry "here goes", so saying he leapt down the crumbling steps, Fred following at his heels, they went on until, after what seemed to be an interminable time they reached the bottom. "Here! Fred I say it's awfully dark, where are you. Here I am Harry, we had better not separate, catch hold of my arm, that's right, forge ahead old man".

The two friends grouped along through the darkness, when suddenly at their side there came a hissing sound. Instinctively the two boys turned towards it. Then out of the darkness there came a piercing pair of yellow eyes swaying from side to side.

"Good God!" what is it cried Fred gripping his companion by the

arm. "By George" replied Harry "It's a snake, Fred, and its coming for us too, look out! As he said the words he sprang back, for at that minute the snake darted forward and seemed to fling itself straight at Harry, only missing him by a fraction, as he sprang out of the way. He siezed Fred by the arm "Quick" he cried "bolt for it" and made towards the stairs as fast as their legs would carry them. All of a sudden there was a terrific crash as though the floor was giving way the whole place seemed to tremble there was a rending crash. Fred shot forward flung his arms above his head and disappeared. Harry felt his legs give way under him and a stunning blow on his head deprived him of his senses.

CHAPTER II

THE SNAKE WORSHIPPERS

COMING to his senses Harry found himself in a stone chamber surrounded by a number of dark villainous looking natives some of which carried torches and at his side lay Fred groaning with two swathy turbaned natives stooping over him. Feeling very dazed he could not understand how he came to be in this strange underground place, but his senses returning he immediately attempted to get up. Immediately the crowd of figures surrounded him and one who appeared to be a leader cried in Hindustanne.

"How is it that the white dogs dare to enter the sacred temple of the great God Kharzee, be it known that any white man who dares to enter the temple of Kharzee are offered up in sacrifice to appease his wrath."

"Black fools" cried Harry "Do you think you can detain a white man in this way lead me and my friend to the entrance of this place at once, or, by Heaven, I will have everyone of you lashed for daring to disobey the white Sahib." So saying he gazed fiercely upon the circle of faces around him, but his heart sank within him for instead of cowering, cringing, natives that generally met his gaze when he spoke thus, he saw they showed calm indifference and an ominous smile, played about the mouth of some of them.

But he was determined to keep up his bold front so he again spoke to them, but, seeing they took no notice he grew more and more angry, and struck the nearest Hindu across the face. Immediately a couple of them siezed him from behind, when the man who appeared to be the chief stepped forward and holding up his hand said "Stay let us bind the white Sahibs and deliver them up to the vengeance of the great God Kharzee for I who am his prophet decree they shall die at sunrise."

At once they seized Harry and bound him and carried him away down long passages and corridors to which there seemed no end. At last they came to a room and thrust him in, soon after the unconscious body of Fred followed. They then slammed the great door and bolted

and locked it and left the place guarded by one of the men who walked up and down outside so as to cut off any possible chance of escape. Harry sat down to think and plan a way of escape for them when Fred should come round. He did not seem to care about the threat of the chief to sacrifice them at sunrise. He remained thus in a sort of stupor for hours as it seemed to him until he awoke to hear his name being called by Fred who had just returned to consciousness. Dragging himself to his feet Fred walked across to Harry and at once untied his bonds and rubbed his chafed limbs.

"I say Harry old chap" cried Fred "What has happened where are we", "Well" said Harry "I am afraid we are in for it, it appears that when we fell through the floor we fell in with a lot of cursed Hindus, who, because I insulted their old idol, bound us and brought us to this wretched place, and have threatened to sacrifice us at sunrise,

"What! Kill us in cold blood they dar'ent the British Government would hang every one of them" exclaimed Fred. "You may be right" said Harry, for he did not like to crush the hope that lay in his friend's heart, yet he knew that the natives would do anything for their gods, and as for the Government finding them out he knew that was impossible.

"I say Harry come here" cried Fred "do you think there is any chance of escape, I have my revolver on me your governor gave me". Feeling in his hip pocket Harry exclaimed "Why so have I, what a bit of luck I wonder those brutes did not spot it, they may come in handy."

Fred, who had begun to feel rather uncomfortable exclaimed "I wonder how we are going to get out of this awful hole, at any rate we will make a fight for it, shush! I can hear someone coming let us tackle him when he goes out, its probably a guard coming with some food, for I should not think they would starve us what do you say, but wait here he comes, you throw your coat over his head and I will seize him round the legs."

At that moment a man entered carrying some coarse rice cakes and a little water in a stone jug and placed it down before them, motioning them to eat but as he turned to go he was sized by the legs, the coat was flung over his head and he fell to the stone floor like a log.

"Well done" cried Harry still holding the coat over the man's head. "Hi old fellow do not suffocate him he has been stunned by his fall so he won't cry leave go of him now" Harry released his hold and rose to his feet but the moment he let go, the native gave a yell which echoed throughout the empty corridors. In vain Harry flung himself upon him but too late, for already they heard the rush of feet upon the corridor and turning they rushed through the door to find a mob of natives yelling and brandishing knives, dashing down towards them, the boys backed down the corridor drawing their revolvers and Harry cried "The man who passes that door dies, move and I fire."

CHAPTER III

THE ALTAR OF KHARZEE

THE priests who appeared to be the leaders rushed on brandishing their knives and laughing at Harry's challenge, but there was a sharp crack a spit of fire and the foremost priest fell dead. Crack! Crack! Crack! three shots rang out in succession, and two more priests fell, but the rest dashed on heedlessly, their long scimitars glistening and flashing in the light of the torches which some carried.

"Quick Fred we cannot hold much longer we must make a dash for it, come on our legs are our lives, keep up old chap." They dashed through the maze of corridors with the mob at their heels. At last coming to a larger corridor they saw straight ahead a flickering light, and rushed towards it with the priests almost up to them. On they dashed through the great door and found themselves in a vast gallery, below them was a wonderful altar carved in gold and silver and on the top resting on its coils was a huge cobra of solid gold, traced with magnificent Indian designs and in the flat head their glistened two eyes which sparkled like huge diamonds. Around this edifice at the distance of about twenty feet, was a bank of fire about 6 foot deep, so that no one could approach the altar without passing through this awful furnace.

"I say old chap now were done with a vengeance" said Harry "We are evidently in their temple, By Jove! it's a wonderful place, but I wonder if there is another entrance if not we are done". They rushed round the other side but no good the temple was circular and there was but one entrance.

"Good God we are trapped" cried Fred "Here come those beastly natives, what shall we do"? They had just reached the opposite side of the temple, meanwhile the natives were rushing round both sides to close in upon them. "I think we are pretty near the end of our tether" said Harry, "Still we can show them, that we will die like Englishmen, and what's more we can sting if we like too. Good-bye old fellow".

As they gripped hands and stood side by side with their backs to the arena, the priests seeing the revolvers in their hands, stopped and held a consultation for some minutes, but at last decided on their attack, on they came, brandishing their sabres and yelling like fiends. Crack! Crack! went the revolvers, Crack! Crack! they went again and each time a man fell, but now they were at too close quarters to do any good with their revolvers, Fred's was knocked out of his hand and he found himself wrestling with a huge hindu. A man rushed at Harry, brandishing his knife and calling on Kharzee to avenge the insult brought on his temple, Harry's fist shot out and down went the man like a stone, a second man rushed at him but Harry fired point blank in his face, as he did so he caught a glimpse of Fred still swaying backwards and forwards, trying to trip the Hindu. Then a little man with a long curved knife rushed to the Hindu's aid.

his knife descended, Harry was in terror for his comrade but Fred just swerved aside so that instead of entering his back it only gashed his shoulder, but before he could recover his balance the Hindu struck him in the face, and down he went unconscious.

Harry sprang to his friend's rescue, and hit out right and left, everyone fell before him till he reached his comrade's side. The enraged natives closed upon them once more, it was fifty to one, he had no chance against so many. In the midst of his despair an idea flashed across his mind, it might do it's a chance of life anyhow, he thought, and seizing Fred in his arms he sprang right over the gallery and landed exhausted in the arena at the altar steps. He lay still without attempting to get up, his mind seemed to blur, he remembered hearing someone giving order in English, and knew no more.

CHAPTER IV

HOME AGAIN

"WHERE am I" Harry murmured faintly. "It's alright old chap, drink some of this cordial, you will soon recover now." Harry looked up to find himself at home, in bed with Fred bending over him. "You have been raving and ill for weeks old chap, do not you remember our fight in the temple, but wait here comes your governor."

At that moment the Colonel entered. "He has recovered consciousness Colonel" The Colonel walked straight to the bed. "Good Harry my lad, I thought you were never coming round again" he said, "You have been down with fever old chap, after your little adventure in that temple, but I say we only just came in time".

Harry who was beginning to recover himself said "Why what happened Governor, how did you discover us". The Colonel taking a seat preceded to explain how it was that he arrived in the nick of time. "Why when I told you," he began "not to stray from the main track of the jungle, Julawar heard me, so when you did, he left the game, and followed you. He saw you go down the stone steps, and was standing at the bottom when you fell through the floor. Luckily he had been a snake worshipper, and knew the temple and all its passages quite well, so seeing you fall through he knew that the native would capture you, and sacrifice you at dawn. He at once returned to me, so I at once took a company of men, and arrived to find you unconscious on the steps of the altar. At first we did not know what to do, but fortunately Julawar knew of a secret passage used by the priest to perform sacrifices to their God. We were guided by Julawar to the passage and came and took you away. And now I come to think of it the adventure was worth the trouble for the two eyes in the snake idol were about the two finest diamonds I have ever set eyes on, and you will be pleased to hear that they have been sold in Amsterdam for £10,000 each, so you are both rich men.

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Harry soon recovered, but he was very weak, owing to his six weeks raging fever. However his strength came back to him and in due course he joined the army, and later on was appointed to a good post in India, where he often met Fred Manners, who entered Secret Service out there, and when the two old friends stay with each other, and sometimes talk over their different adventures, they quite agree that none have been quite as exciting as the first.

THE END

DENNIS WHEATLEY,
April, 1911.

STORY VII

AFTER THE 'SNAKE WITH THE DIAMOND EYES' I THOUGHT IT WOULD be amusing for such readers as may be interested in the development of a thriller writer to see a specimen from the next stage in my career.

The following yarn dates from the early months of my first marriage in 1923. To have a home of my own was grand fun, but proving unexpectedly expensive, and in those days, as my father was still alive, I was not yet burdened with the responsibilities of a business. In consequence my thoughts turned to writing as a way of augmenting my income.

However, in the gay twenties there were so many good parties to go to and little dinners to give in my new home that *thinking* about writing on an odd Sunday afternoon or one evening in six was pretty well as far as I got. As I was not really hard up I soon dropped the project altogether, and *The Secret Sign* is the only souvenir I have of that spontaneous but short-lived attempt to earn wealth and fame by the pushing of a pencil.

The scene is Cairo; but I fear it lacks the authentic touch that I was able to give years later, after having spent a February in the Egyptian capital, to those many chapters of my long thriller, *The Quest of Julien Day*, which were set in the same city. The plot, too, is a little thin, but at least this story has the merit that by the time I wrote it I had realized the desirability of some sort of twist to bring about the happy dénouement of such a tale.

THE SECRET SIGN

IF you have ever doubted that red-headed people possess a temper, you should have seen Wobbles stalk out through the Lounge of Sheppards' Hotel; his big chin jutting out like the prow of a battleship, and his blue eyes positively blazing with rage.

Of course he had asked for it—he knew that. If you are nothing more distinguished than a flight-lieutenant in the Air Force, and choose to spend your time and much more money than you've actually got, dashing round Cairo with a bewilderingly lovely girl who also happens to be heiress to several million dollars, you cannot really be surprised if her mother sends for you one evening, and gently but firmly intimates that your attentions should cease forthwith.

Wobbles paused on the steps of the hotel, he glowered fiercely into the darkness of the still, hot, night. That Veronica's mother would turn him down he had known all along—but that did not console him; angrily he thought of her fat, kind smile.

"It's not that I don't like you, Mr. Wobbles, but your being around so much is spoiling Veronica's chances, if you know what I mean."

What utter rot! Veronica was only twenty and with eyes like hers she could get any man she chose. 'Chances' indeed! She'd have

thousands—and the old woman hadn't even the brains to remember his proper name. Wobbles drew fiercely at the Punch Corona which Mrs. Van Hoode had thrust upon him as a sort of consolation prize. Then, in a fit of angry abstraction, as he stamped down the steps, he threw it, three parts unsmoked, away.

One of the many loungers who linger near the hotel entrance stooped quickly, and picked it up. Wobbles glared—he liked a good cigar. It added still further to his rage that he should have wasted it.

A coal-black negro had secured the prize—he favoured Wobbles with a wide-lipped smile: “Dis way, sar,” he said, as he made a quick salaam, “yo jest folla me.”

Wobbles stared angrily. What did the fellow mean?—he had got a darned good cigar, and that was that. He turned gloomily away, but the negro was insistent.

“Dis way, sar,” he repeated. “Ah know what you want—yo jus’ folla me.”

Now Wobbles knew his Cairo as well as any English officer *can* know a native city in which he has been stationed for eighteen months. He realized with little interest that the negro must be one of the touts for houses of dubious entertainment, that infest the city; and there the matter would have ended had not the negro flourished the discarded cigar and closed one eye.

“Ah know what yo want, sar—I’ve sent to meet de gentlemens like yo,” with which cryptic remark he turned on his heel and walked away.

Now what does all this mean? Thought Wobbles, he can’t be an ordinary tout or he wouldn’t clear off like that. The thought flashed through his mind that the night was young—the gramophone in the Mess would be intolerable—and that in his present state of mind he would never be able to sleep. Wobbles was always an impulsive person—the negro’s invitation proffered distraction of some kind, and that was what he wanted above all things.

The red fez, set at a jaunty angle on the black’s curly hair, was already some twenty paces away. Without a thought as to the possible trouble in which he might be landing himself, Wobbles set off after it, down the street.

At a brisk pace, Fate, in the person of the white-robed guide, shouldered his way through the jostling crowd. Soon he turned away from the lighted streets into a labyrinth of crooked, narrow ways. Wobbles knew that he was being led into the heart of the native quarter. A fetid odour of decaying garbage and unwashed humanity came to his nostrils—he had half a mind to turn back. The man would probably only lead him to some sordid den, where drink-sodden women made the night hideous with their raucous laughter—and yet—it did seem that the fellow had been waiting there especially for him; he might, after all, lead him to some place of interest which he had not yet seen.

Glancing from time to time over his shoulder to see that Wobbles followed, the negro strode on—plunging even deeper into a maze of evil-smelling streets—jostled by black men and by brown—Copts,

Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. Now and then by the flickering light of an occasional lamp a veiled woman flitted past, silent and intent on some mysterious errand of her own.

At last the negro paused before a heavy door—beside it lay a heap of refuse making the night air foul—he knocked, and Wobbles, who had caught him up, was conscious of being carefully scrutinized by a pair of almond-shaped eyes, peering at him from behind an iron grill.

The inspection seemed satisfactory, for the door was opened by the owner of the eyes—a yellow-skinned Celestial. The negro produced the partially smoked cigar which Wobbles had thrown away, and showed it to the yellow man. Wobbles looked on with interest. Unconsciously, it seemed, he had given a secret sign, and so provoked the negro's interest. He wondered what was going to happen now, as with some misgiving he followed his guide up a flight of rickety carpetless stairs which creaked abominably.

At the top the negro pulled aside a curtain, and bowed him into a room, the magnificence of which was in striking contrast to the entrance of the house. The walls were hung with rich satin embroidered in many colours, huge golden dragons—butterflies—strange flowers, and birds, rioted and twisted in Oriental splendour; claws, teeth, and eyes were richly inlaid with ivory, mother-of-pearl, and gold set with uncut gems. One end of the room was devoted to an altar—upon it, benign and impassive, sat a golden idol, one hand upraised in the conventional attitude, 'listening to prayer'.

He knew it to be an image of the Chinese Mother Goddess 'Quan Yin', before her burnt many joss-sticks and a little lamp of perfumed oil.

In the centre of this beautiful room sat three Chinamen; two were clad in wide-sleeved, blue silk blouses, the third in a gorgeous robe of crimson satin. On the breast of the robe a peacock had been embroidered in many coloured silks and gold thread. All three wore little black skull-caps, and were engaged in a game of Fan-tan.

The man in the Mandarin robe looked up for one brief second, then he placidly continued his game. Yet in that swift glance from those heavily-lidded eyes, Wobbles felt that he had been weighed up, analysed and docketed in the Oriental's brain.

The negro went over to the old man and once more held out the Punch Corona. The Chinaman nodded, ran his yellow hand down his long drooping moustaches which dangled to his chest, and said in a low voice: "Engleesh man—plenty money—come smokey plipe."

"So that's the game," thought Wobbles, "to discard a cigar, was to evince a desire for the pipe. Such was evidently the signal that the wealthy devotees of the poppy gave, who were staying at Sheppards', to the waiting negro outside. Well—after all, why not? He had never smoked opium before, chance had brought him to the place; it was said that under the influence of the drug all dreams came true—perhaps he would turn into a bankrupt earl—or some rotten little dago prince—just the sort of bird Mrs. Van Hooede would favour for his divine Veronica." He drew out his wallet.

The old Chinaman struck a little gong, and another Oriental,

with hands tucked into wide sleeves, made his appearance—silent and cringing.

Wobbles parted with a note, and some coins to the negro guide. One of the gorgeous hangings was drawn aside, and he was led down a dark passage to a little room. It was sparsely furnished, and the cushions of the bunk which occupied one side of it were soiled and shabby. It had no windows and a stale atmosphere hung in the confined space.

Wobbles felt a sense of repulsion come over him, but he remembered that the lovers of the dream-pipe build their palaces from their imagination, so he sat down to wait on the edge of the bunk.

The Chinaman was busy rolling a pellet of the drug between his palms; deftly he picked it up on the end of a needle and held it for a moment in the flame of a lamp. He handed Wobbles the brass pipe—that magic gateway to a world of celestial brightness, where all is roses and troubles are no more—then silently he withdrew.

It was infinitely quiet in the little room. Wobbles spread his handkerchief on the pillow, stretched himself on the bunk, and inhaled a breath from the pipe. At first the fumes made him cough and splutter, but a pleasant feeling of languor began to steal over him.

He felt very tired, but some of his anger had left him—he tried the pipe again, this time with more success. He grew drowsy—the walls seemed to be closing in on him—the tiny flame of the lamp diminished to a pin-point of light, and then suddenly increased before his eyes to a bright and lurid flame; a moment later it had almost disappeared once more—he lay still, the drug was working.

Somewhere a long way away he could hear voices very faintly—as though they came to him from an infinite distance over a weak telephone wire. Someone seemed to be quarrelling. He cursed them for fools and wished that they would stop, he was deliciously drowsy, these bickering voices irritated him.

He picked up the pipe to draw another puff, but as he moved the voices grew much louder. He scowled at the door through which they seemed to come, and thought of shouting to them to go away—and let him sleep. With an effort he sat up. The room seemed to be going round him; he concentrated on the door, trying to focus it with his eyes and make it stay still. It occurred to his dazed mind that this was really not much fun—no dreams—no nothing—and just the same stupid feeling as if one was tight. Perhaps he hadn't taken enough—he reached again for the pipe—then he frowned in perplexity. What a row there was going on somewhere—he distinctly heard the trampling of feet and then a crash.

"Help!" came a voice. "Help!"

Vaguely it dawned on Wobbles that some fellow was trying to do some other fellow in. "How idiotic," he thought, "why the devil couldn't they be sensible people—smoke their rotten pipes if they wanted to and go to sleep—still—couldn't have chaps killing one another—he supposed he'd have to go and see about it."

He staggered to his feet and lurched towards the door. "Lord,

what a row they were making." He fumbled with the latch and the door opened with a creak.

In the passage a terrific struggle was going on; a burly middle-aged man lay stretched out on the floor—two wiry Chinks were trying to stop his shouts, and drag him back into a room close by. He was kicking for all he was worth and yelling lustily.

Wobbles' bemused mind cleared with amazing suddenness—this was no figment of a drugged imagination, two lousy Chinese devils maltreating a white man, by Gad—he'd see about that. He was still unsteady on his legs, but flung himself on the nearest Oriental.

The Chinaman slithered from his grasp, then quick as lightning whipped a long curved knife from his baggy sleeve. He crouched there—glaring, his gums drawn back, his breath made a hissing sound as he let it out—he was about to spring. Wobbles did not wait for him. He sailed right in. The knife went up, Wobbles knocked it aside—he lashed out with his right—the Chinese took it on the jaw and went down in a heap.

The elderly man was on his feet again; he puffed and gasped and struggled, and he looked about all in, but he hung on to his adversary gamely. Wobbles seized the other Chink by the back of the neck, and hauled him off—with a terrific heave he pitched him bodily into a corner. The yellow man's head hit the skirting with a thump—he lay where he had fallen, groaning.

"Come on," yelled Wobbles, "we must get out of this." He pushed the other man before him down the passage, but as they came to the big curtain he thrust his way in front. He grasped the satin with both hands and gave a wrench—with a tearing sound it came away—crumpling in heavy folds.

In the middle of the reception room stood the old man with the peacock robe. A knife whizzed as the curtain fell, it plopped into the thick material that Wobbles held at arm's length—had he pushed the hanging aside instead of wrenching it down, the knife would have found its mark. The old man's hand flew up again—a second knife flashed through the air—it stuck, quivering in a panel only a few inches from Wobbles' head. He dropped the curtain, rushed to the altar, seized Quan Yin, and swung her in the air. With one swift motion he flung the heavy image. The Oriental stood, rooted to the spot—horror-struck at the sacrilege—the golden figure struck him full on the chest, he fell backwards, screaming curses in a high, shrill voice.

Wobbles' companion was half-way down the stairs—Wobbles dashed after him. The yellow porter stood at the bottom. The burly man jumped the last six steps and landed on the Chink. They rolled together in the hallway—the Chinaman wriggled free and stood up; Wobbles hit him good and strong—he went down again like a felled ox. The other struggled to his feet—a moment later they stood together in the dark and silent alley.

Panting and speechless, they walked together down the noisome court to the nearest street. Under a corner lamp Wobbles had his first opportunity of scrutinizing the man he had rescued. He was in a shocking state—collar torn off, tie under ear, dusty and dishevelled;

but making due allowance for that he seemed a prosperous-looking person. Directly he had regained his breath he spoke:

"I'm almighty grateful to you, friend, for lugging me out of that joint."

"Oh, not at all," murmured Wobbles in a depressed voice; with the open air the fact that he would not be able to ride with Veronica the next morning came back to him strongly.

"Known old Loo-chi for years," the American went on. "Knew him way back in 'Frisco—'fore you were born I reckon."

Wobbles was no longer interested, but he thought it only polite to ask: "What was the row about then?"

The American became confidential. "See here, son, I'm not supposed to be in Cairo—my wife 'ud give me hell, and then some, if she knew. I'm still young at sixty—that's my trouble—but Loo-chi knows who I am. I reckon he thought he'd hold me for a roll of greenbacks when I happened on his dope-joint, doin' the rounds."

"Well—er—I'm glad to have helped you out," Wobbles said vaguely. He was wondering what he could do now.

"Say—what made you hit the pipe," asked the stranger curiously.

Wobbles gave a tired laugh. "Oh, a woman—the usual story."

"Women is hell," the American agreed, "but what's the girl find wrong with you anyway—you seem a real live man."

"It's not the girl," said Wobbles quickly. "It's her mother. They've got masses of money, and I'm just a poor devil of an air force officer; that's the trouble. If only she was poor and I was rich—but I don't want to bore you with all this——" He sighed heavily.

"Now that's real hard," exclaimed the big man sympathetically, "Never mind, son, come and split a bottle with me at Sheppards'—but a word to the wise young man. I'm just off the train from Alex.; the scrap you got me out of was way back at the railway station! See!"

Wobbles nodded. "Anything you like," he agreed.

A few minutes later they were back in the well-lighted streets; they walked up the steps of the hotel and into the lounge side by side.

At a small table sat a charming figure, the mere sight of her made Wobbles' heart bump: her well-marked eyebrows became two bows of surprise as they approached. "Why, Papa," she exclaimed, "I thought you were in Alex.—but what a state you're in—and how did you become acquainted with my boy friend, too?"

"I'm right off the train, honey," declared Mr. Van Hoode firmly. He cocked a shrewd eye at Wobbles, and found that young man gazing at his daughter with his soul in his eyes. He broke into a sudden smile. "You two had better get dancing while I clean up and have a word with Moma. I've a hunch your boy friend's been in luck to-night."

Some two hours later Wobbles stood once more on the steps of Sheppards'. The patient negro was still waiting—to his great surprise he got a handsome tip. Wobbles was smoking yet another of the Van Hoode cigars, but this time he did not throw it—three parts unsmoked—away.

STORY VIII

I CAN IMAGINE THE MAJORITY OF READERS SAYING "ENOUGH OF THIS! We don't want any more immature fumbblings but the sort of short story that we expected to get in a Dennis Wheatley book."

That is a reasonable demand, although whether this story will be up to expectations it is beyond my power to foresee. I can only state that, apart from *The Man with the Girlish Face* series of super-shorts, this is by far the most recent of my attempts to fulfil a request from an Editor for a potted thrill.

I wrote the story when I was on holiday in Rome in 1938 and it was only the unusualness of the request from the Editor of the *Daily Sketch* which intrigued me into sitting down to work in a distinctly warm hotel bedroom. He wrote to me that he was planning a series of six stories each by a different author but all having in common the same situation for their opening.

A pretty girl comes out of an hotel and gets into her waiting car. As she is about to drive off the hotel porter comes running after her with a small parcel in his hand exclaiming "Hi! Miss, you've forgotten this!" Instead of taking the parcel the girl gives him a startled glance and, jamming her foot down on the accelerator of the already moving car dashes off down the street leaving the astonished porter still clutching the parcel in his hand.

What story-teller worthy of his salt could possibly have resisted such an invitation? I was not in the least surprised to learn that several of my most distinguished contemporaries in other fields of fiction had already accepted it.

I forget now if I did my brooding over the plot on the dusty floor of the Senate House where Cæsar died—which I was one of the first privileged few to see after some eighteen hundred years' accumulation of refuses had been evacuated from it—while wandering among the ruins of the Imperial Palaces on the Palatine hill, where once Nero had supped off larks' tongues and watched Rome burn; in the sacred precincts of the Vatican among the Raphaels and Michelangelos; or while eating Alfredo's superbly cooked spaghetti, which in its own way was as great an artistic creation as any other in the Eternal City.

Wherever I spent my day the fact remains that I returned with the story fully thought out in my mind and wrote it in my room that night, lubricating the works meanwhile with a bottle of well-iced sparkling Asti.

Among the other participants in this delightful game were Ethel Mannin, P. G. Wodehouse and, I think, Agatha Christie—I forget the other two. But you can well imagine how widely our stories differed from each other after our common kick-off. I only wish that I could reprint the whole series for your enjoyment, but laws of copyright which, thank goodness, protect us all from such piracy, force me to confine myself to my own version of the circumstances which led to a pretty girl deliberately driving off without the parcel she had left behind.

DEATH AT THREE-THIRTY

THE blue waters of the Mediterranean lap the tumble-down quays of Decastzban. It is a little town, old when Rome was young, smelly, picturesque; nestling at the foot of craggy, sun-scorched mountains.

Its normally sleepy Plaza was thronged with a murmuring crowd; the Dictator had honoured the small port with a one night visit and was to leave again for the capital that afternoon.

From the entrance of the old "Three Angels" Hotel a girl suddenly appeared. Soldiers held back the crowd as she hurried to a waiting car. Some trunks were strapped upon its grid and a tall gaunt man sat hunched in the passenger seat.

Police Chief Sperantze waved her forward. He knew Sabina Tovorri; had known her since she was a little girl. Who did not know her haughty profile and regal carriage in Decastzban? Her family had possessed great estates in the neighbourhood—until the Revolution. Since, she had made good as a journalist on the local paper; her foreign education had helped her in that—and her looks. Sperantze was mildly surprised that she neglected to give him her usual smile. Her olive face was clouded and the corners of her shapely mouth turned down. He assumed, quite wrongly, that the "Great Man" had refused her an interview.

As Sabina wriggled into the driver's seat, the porter came running from the hotel. Over his outstretched arm was slung a camera and in his hand he held a small square package. "*Contessa!*" he cried. "*Contessa*, you have forgotten this!"

She gave him one startled glance, jammed her small foot on the accelerator and the car, gathering speed, raced away down the troop-lined street.

The man beside her had noticed nothing. He turned his gaunt face towards her and stared for a moment at the finely-cut features, pale under their tan. His eyes were dull half-filmed like those of a snake or drug-taker, but his question was curt. "Well?"

"An utter failure," she almost choked. "We might have known."

"What! He refused to see you after all?"

"No, I saw him; and he was charming. Whatever he may have done he has an air, that one, and his eyes. Wise, understanding, kind. I felt like a sneak thief trying to pick the pocket of a saint."

"You little fool." The gaunt man's mouth worked furiously.

"How like a woman to fall for that mountebank. I warned you to keep your eyes away from him because his gaze is known to be hypnotic. Yet you must stare at him so that scruples overcame your determination at the last moment."

"They might have!" she exclaimed bitterly. "He's not evil—an unscrupulous brigand—as I've always been taught to believe. I know that now—but there was no last moment. Your agents are hopelessly incompetent, Korto. They should have told you—we should have realized, ourselves. His people are prepared for such attempts. I had no chance to leave the parcel in his room. Before I entered it

everything was taken from me. The bomb, my camera, even my bag—and when I came out I was too dazed to think. . . .”

Sabina lied unconsciously. She had been thinking, hard, fast, furiously, from the very second she had been compelled to relinquish her belongings. A wiry, forceful-looking young officer had courteously but firmly relieved her of them in the ante-room. She had recognized him at the first glance. It was Ruran: her childhood friend and girlhood lover. No! That was not true. He had kissed her once, only once, on a hot summer night heavy with thunder. The storm had broken and driven them indoors. Next day he had gone off to begin his military service.

So much had happened since; a dozen different men had occupied her interest; there had been the Revolution and the confiscation of her father's property; the new necessity to carve a career for herself. She had scarcely given Ruran a thought in half a dozen years, but no woman ever forgets the first time she receives a kiss and gives it back with meaning.

She did not think he had recognized her. The formalities had only occupied a matter of seconds before she was ushered into the Dictator's room. The people at the hotel knew her real name, but that under which she wrote her articles would have conveyed nothing to Ruran. Vaguely she remembered hearing that he had become one of the Dictator's most vigorous supporters, but to meet him face to face after all those years at such a tense moment had thrown her completely off her balance.

“What happened to the bomb?” asked Korto suddenly.

“It's still there. The porter came after me with it, but I lost my head and drove away.”

“Good,” he said quietly. “With luck it may still settle one or two of those swine even if we've failed to get the arch-traitor himself.”

She swung upon him furiously. “D'you think I'll chance it killing innocent people?” As she spoke she swung the car into the curb and braked viciously, bringing it to a halt outside a small *patisserie*.

“What are you going to do?” he grunted, grabbing at her wrist.

Her eyes snapped at him. “Telephone, of course. Tell them to put it out of action. It's only ten past three and the thing's not timed to explode until half-past.”

“Listen,” his voice was urgent. “Our getaway's all fixed. I hate to exercise pressure on you yet again, but I still have your father's papers. He doesn't like being poor, but he'll like prison far less. I told you what I'd do if you double-crossed me, and I'll do it yet if you get us caught through telephoning some damn-fool warning.”

With a sudden unexpected wrench, Sabina tore her arm away and flung herself out of the car. He made a swift movement to follow her, then thought better of it. Three minutes later she rejoined him, and the car sped on through the narrow twisting streets towards the west gate of the old town.

“Hell!” exclaimed Korto as they came in sight of the ancient arch flanked by squat battlemented towers. “See where your crazy warning's landed us. They've telephoned the garrison.”

A double file of carbineers barred their progress. Korto's hand slid up to his armpit holster, but he withdrew it as a young officer, flourishing an automatic, jumped on the running board.

"Turn your car round," he snapped at Sabina. "You're wanted at Headquarters—quick now."

Sick with fear and apprehension, she obeyed. If only she had waited to telephone until they were outside the town—but it was too late to think of that now. Tales of the Dictator's prisons flashed through her mind. She would probably suffer unspeakable degradation—unless they shot her—which was even more likely. In a mist of misery she automatically steered the car back to the "Three Angels" and noticed subconsciously that the clock in the Plaza showed it to be twenty past three.

The Lieutenant shepherded them straight upstairs to the ante-room. Ruran sat there behind a desk table; on it reposed her bag, camera and the package containing the infernal machine: a small alarm clock attached by a fuse to a pound of gelignite and set to go off at three-thirty exactly.

Ruran dismissed the Lieutenant of Carbineers with a nod, glanced at Korto, and signed to two troopers standing at the door. "Take this man away. Put him below in the courtyard and keep him under observation from the gateway. No one is to be allowed to speak to him or go near him."

With a baleful glance at Sabina, Korto turned, but Ruran called after him. "Here, take this trash away—your girl friend's not likely to need it from now on."

He held out the camera and handbag. With a sullen shrug Korto took them and left the room between his guards. Ruran and Sabina were alone.

"Have you anything to say?" His eyes were hard as rocks, his voice flinty.

"You—you don't remember me?" Sabina loathed herself even as she spoke for attempting to soften him by recalling their old friendship, yet they were the only words she could think of.

"Perfectly," he replied coldly. "You are Sabina Tovorri, daughter of Count Tovorri, the Liberal leader whose estates were confiscated for having opposed my great Master's ordinances for saving our country from anarchy. Now, it seems, you have turned anarchist yourself. What have you to say about this?" He tapped the square package on the desk before him.

Sabina stared at it in sudden horror. "Good God, you haven't opened it?" she gasped. "It—it's timed to go off at half-past three."

"So you told the porter on the telephone," Ruran observed. "It is now twenty-three minutes past. His Excellency is not original in desiring that, wherever possible, punishment should fit the crime. I shall not touch the infernal thing, but propose to leave you with it."

Her eyes flickered towards the window, but he caught her glance. "Oh, no!" he smiled sardonically, as he stood up. "I do not intend that you should throw it outside and kill somebody else."

With a swift movement he opened the top drawer of the desk,

slipped the package inside and, locking the drawer, pocketed the key. "It will shatter the desk, of course, but I doubt if it will kill you. Your chance of surviving will be slightly better than His Excellency's would have been." Before Sabina had time to collect her wits he had gone, locking the door behind him.

With a gasp of dismay she flung herself on the heavy desk and wrenched at the drawer. A brass handle came away in her hand, grazing her knuckles. Her eyes distended by terror, she stared frantically round for some implement with which she might force the lock. It was a sparsely furnished hotel sitting-room and she could see nothing which would serve her purpose. She ran to the window, but a wire mosquito screen was nailed across it. As she stared out she saw Korto, the cause of her desperate plight, sitting hunched up on the edge of a fountain in the empty courtyard. By banging on the wire she endeavoured to attract his attention, but he was sunk in torpid gloom. A clock showed above the stables opposite; it was twenty-six minutes past three. Swinging round she attacked the drawer again with renewed frenzy. For three ghastly minutes, each of which seemed an age, she stabbed at the lock with the splintered end of a bone paper-knife. Her hands were bruised and bleeding. She glimpsed the clock again, it was twenty-nine minutes past. In another moment the desk would shatter in a searing sheet of flame. Its jagged splinters would pierce her flesh. She would be stunned, perhaps killed, by the force of the explosion. Wildly she stared round for cover; but the room held no cupboards, only the desk and a few chairs.

Suddenly the door opened. Ruran and the 'Great Man' stood there.

"Your Excellency," said Ruran, "you have met this lady as a journalist; I now wish to present her as the Countess Tovorri. Her father's estates were confiscated, you will remember, but to-day she has rendered you a great service. She warned us by telephone that the anarchist Korto was about to attempt your assassination with a bomb."

"Korto!" exclaimed the Dictator. "Where is he?"

"Down there in the courtyard," said Ruran pointing.

For one second Sabina withdrew her terrified gaze from the desk. The clock above the stable stood at half-past three. There was a blinding flash, a cloud of smoke, windows rattled violently; and when they could see again, Korto's mangled body lay on the flagstones by the fountain.

A few minutes later Ruran was giving Sabina a badly needed cognac; his eyes had softened to their old friendliness and humour.

"I had to give you a lesson," he said softly, "but I have memories too. It was quite simple to transfer the bomb from the package to your camera case before you came in and send Korto out there with it."

STORY IX

THIS STORY HAS NEVER BEFORE APPEARED IN PRINT FOR A VERY SIMPLE reason—it has never been offered to an Editor. As soon as I had written it I realized that it contained the bare bones of a skeleton strong enough to carry the flesh and blood of a full-length novel. I held it back with the sure instinct that some day I would write a book centering round a golden-headed Castilian girl; and sure enough, some seven years later I did, bringing it out under the original title.

Those readers who recall the book need have no fear that the short story is simply a synopsis of it. Except that the central figure in both is a young Royalist plotting against the Government which took over after King Alfonso was compelled to leave his throne, they have nothing in common; even the girl's name is different.

When I wrote the short story the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War was still some years ahead in an unknown future. The book, on the other hand, covered the first six months of that ghastly struggle, and into it came my old friends the Duke de Richelieu, Simon Aron, Rex Van Ryn, Richard Eaton, and the Princess Marie Lou.

As the book is now out of print, owing to the paper famine caused by the war, I may say without being accused of seeking to advertise it, that I have always thought it one of the best that I have ever written. There was a special reason for this.

I have never sought to minimize the great debt that I owe to Dumas, or disguise the fact that my 'Modern Musketeers' are modelled on his magnificent originals. The wise and noble Athos was the prototype of the Duke, simple, strong-limbed Porthos of the good-hearted Rex, wily Aramis of the subtle-minded Simon, and the role of gallant D'Artagnan, who had so many qualities, is filled, in some respects at least, by Richard Eaton.

In *Twenty Years After* Dumas used the outbreak of the Fronde to divide his quartet. D'Artagnan and the faithful Porthos served the Court Party, while Athos and Aramis sided with the rebellious nobles. Devoted still at heart, but not without bitter differences of opinion, they were then set to pit their wits against each other.

The Spanish Civil War furnished me with an admirable setting in which to follow once more in the footsteps of the great master. Quite naturally the Duke would be in sympathy with the Spanish Monarchists, and Richard, as a staunch supporter of the best Conservative tradition, would be with him; whereas Simon, the Liberal Jew, and Rex, the Democratic American, would equally naturally espouse the cause of the Spanish Socialists.

Dividing the friends against each other on a major political issue gave me the chance to state the arguments for both sides in the Spanish War with absolute fairness. The proof that I succeeded in this was proved by an amusing sequel. Immediately the book appeared, the *Morning Post*, which had given my earlier novels most excellent

notices, took me severely to task as a dangerous Communist, while the *Daily Worker* dubbed me a dyed-in-the-wool Fascist. Happily, the rest of the national Press kept its sense of proportion and praised the book even beyond its deserts as not only a good story, but a well-balanced account of the causes of the Spanish troubles.

In any case, having once got my four heroes into Spain on such a basis, the rest was easy. Against a background of burning churches, the siege of the Alcazar, and the sack of the Finnish Legation, they lied to each other like troopers whenever they met, schemed, intrigued, and cheated, yet positively had to rescue each other at times of crisis from the fury of the very people they were serving.

To revert to the present story. Just like its hero I had loved my visit to Madrid and the other old Spanish cities, but everyone I met urged me to go to Barcelona. I did, and found it a lousy town. But the *Ponce de Leon* is a pleasant spot, and if you ever go there after the war is over, maybe you, too, will meet a Golden Spaniard.

THE GOLDEN SPANIARD

I was at Oliver Watville's rooms in the Adelphi. His man handed me the evening paper. "Mr. Watville will be here in one moment, sir," he said, and closed the door.

I glanced casually at the headlines and then put the paper down. "What a pleasant, restful room this is," I was thinking. "Tidy but lived in, and Oliver has such a delightful collection of interesting bits and pieces; nothing of great value, I suppose, but all carefully chosen, and each with its own association."

A square casket on the table by my side caught my eye. "Hello, that's new," I thought, and picked it up. It was old and a little battered, but a lovely thing. Tortoiseshell, encrusted with gold filigree work and semi-precious stones. I tried to open it, but it was locked.

Oliver came in at that moment. "Hello," he said, "looking at my new box? I'll give you a dozen guesses as to what's inside it."

I weighed it in my hand; it was a fair size, but very light. "Nothing," I suggested, with a grin.

He laughed. "You're wrong, my boy, but you would never guess in a month of Sundays—it's full of gold!"

"Gold?" I said incredulously, "it can't be—it would weigh a ton."

"Fact," he nodded, "I'll show you if you like." As he spoke he took out a small key and unlocked the casket.

He was right—the thing was full to the brim of twisting, curling pieces, shimmering and glowing in the late afternoon sunlight. "Good Lord—it's human hair," I gasped; "wherever did you get it?"

"Off the girl's head," laughed Oliver. "Cigarette?" He offered me his case.

"Thanks." I took one and sat down again. I regarded Oliver with a speculative look. "What new bit of trouble have you been getting yourself into now?" I enquired.

"Trouble's the word," he agreed, and he laughed again as he ran

his hand over his smooth dark head. Oliver has the most infectious laugh of any man I know.

"I'm just back from Spain," he said; "that Spanish gold darn near landed me in a military prison for a long stretch—not so jolly, eh?"

I whistled. I've always thought that Oliver's escapades would get him in a real mess one day, but I said nothing, as I was anxious to hear what he'd been up to.

"Ever been to Barcelona?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Well, that's where I've been, and I shan't risk going back in a hurry, I can tell you. It happened like this.

"I know quite a lot of Spanish people, so I thought I'd take the car and do a trip. I put in a day or two at Biarritz just to get the holiday feeling, then I crossed the frontier at Irun, and set off into Spain.

"My first call was at Valladolid. There wasn't much to see there, but it's a nice old town, and the people I stayed with did me jolly well. Of course, they asked my plans. I told them I was going down to Granada for a few days, and then I meant to take Madrid on the way back.

"Oh, but you must see Barcelona," they said.

"I loved my time in Granada—it's a gorgeous place, and far enough south really to get the sun. I didn't know anybody there, so I put up in an hotel; the manager was quite a decent chap and when he saw me off he said: 'Of course you'll go to Barcelona—it's the finest town in Spain.'

"In Madrid I had a splendid time—I know lots of people there and they did me proud, in spite of the revolution. It's a lovely city—clean, wide streets, fine hotels, and, of course, any amount of things to see, and the pictures at the Prado are too marvellous. But the Spaniards didn't seem to think much of it—every one of them said: 'If only we could live in Barcelona!'

"Well, I really thought there must be something in it, so I decided to put in a couple of days there after I left Madrid.

"It's a filthy hole—Liverpool and Rotterdam rolled into one. Nothing but factories and shipping, dust and flies, and trams—all the squalor of Marseilles without the picturesqueness of the *Vieux Port* and the bay; and to make it more depressing it's built on American lines—hundreds of long straight streets, cutting each other every hundred yards, so that they all look exactly the same.

"I suppose the Spaniards think it's marvellous because it's their only modern city, but half an hour driving round in a taxi was enough for me. I ordered the chap back to the Ritz, where I was staying, with a view to drowning my sorrow in 'White Ladies'.

"The white ladies cheered me up a bit, and it was just on six o'clock, so I knew the Thé Dansant would be starting. The hours they do things are jolly queer—it took me a couple of days to tumble to it. Everything is two hours later than with us. Thé Dansant at six, dinner at nine-thirty, theatres start at eleven, and the night places open up about two. Lord knows when the Spaniards go to sleep!

"I took a table in the dancing-room and watched the crush collect. They're as keen on it as we were just after the war. Of course, no respectable girl is allowed to go; she might run into Papa and his lovely! so there's no trouble about dancing if you want to, but there's a special sort of drill. You write a little note and send it over by the waiter to the lady of your choice. If she likes the look of you she smiles, and everything is all right, but you'd get terribly high-hatted if you just went up and asked the girl to dance.

"They were a smart, expensive-looking lot—the sort you see at Biarritz in the Spanish season—but taken all round they wouldn't have carried off a beauty prize. I had my eye on one pippin who was rather sweet, and not quite so heavily lip-sticked as the rest, so I sent across the usual note.

"Her name was Anita. We jogged round for a bit, and had a drink or two. She was rather a dear, really, and quite a good-looker in her way: matt black hair, and the usual liquid Spanish eyes. I asked her to pity the poor stranger and dine—but she couldn't.

"It seems she had a banker friend in tow—and times were shocking bad for pretty ladies since poor Alfonso went away. If she cut her date with this bird he might refuse the monthly subsidy for her apartment. Nice, rich boy friends were getting scarcer every day since the revolution, and how she was going to get the money for her annual trip to Monte she couldn't think.

"As I was English she could talk freely to me, and she was a Royalist to the backbone. *She* would have been starving altogether if the Communists had had their way. I was sorry she couldn't dine, but she gave me her card before she left, and made the polite little speech proper to the occasion—foreigners always do it so well.

"There wasn't another girl in the place worth bothering about, so I ate my lonely dinner and went early to bed.

"In the morning I consulted the hall porter. I really felt that, after all the rhapsodies I'd heard about the place, there must be something worth going to see, but the only suggestion he could offer was that I should motor out to Ponce da Leon for luncheon.

"It seemed that it was a sort of restaurant place up in the hills outside the town. 'Verrie reech, verrie chic, verrie mani peoples,' he said, so I decided to try my luck.

"The fellow was a liar, of course; the place was all right—quite a luxurious sort of pub, and only built about ten years ago. It had a fine view of the Mediterranean, and terraced gardens, newly laid out, running down the hill, but I had the place entirely to myself.

"A surprised-looking waiter turned up after a bit, and I thought I might just as well eat there as anywhere, so I ordered lunch on the terrace. I think they reared the chicken from the egg by the time they took, but it was very pleasant there with a cool drink in the sunshine. There were no trees, or only very young ones, so I could see the whole of the garden from where I sat. At the bottom there was a lily pool surrounded by paving, and when I looked up from my ice I saw that a girl was standing there.

"*She was a stunner!* Tallish for a woman, about my height—

slim, and as chic as they make 'em. She had on a white skirt, a pale blue coat, and a little blue-and-white knitted beret. Sounds simple enough, I know, but it had the Place Vendôme written all over it—and the girl herself—you should have seen her!

"I decided to go and take a look at the lily pool myself. When I got close to her she fairly took my breath away. Her skin was golden brown, and her eyes were golden, too—a kind of tawny colour flecked with yellow—and her hair! Well, you've seen her hair—it's in that box. It was a mass of curls, and the real gold that you could lose sovereigns in. It's the type of beauty that I've often heard of but never seen till then. She was a real golden Spaniard.

"I looked at the lily pool, and then I said quite casually: 'It's jolly hot here, isn't it?'

"Well, that didn't seem to go; she didn't just ignore me as lots of women would, she just looked at me with her big, steady golden eyes until I was forced to look away. I felt an utter fool—that quiet stare was like a douche of cold water down my spine. It knocked me out so completely that I simply hadn't the guts to go on and try again.

"After a moment she turned away and strolled over towards the gate; I watched her as she stood there, powdering her nose, but I'd seen a thing she hadn't noticed. When she took out her powder-puff something had fallen from her bag. It was lying on the ground at her feet.

"I walked towards her, and as I went I was racking my brains for something really startling to say to her when I handed her back whatever it was she had dropped. I was terribly keen to talk to her, and I knew that only by surprising her out of herself should I stand a chance.

"It wasn't any good, though. At that moment a big Hispano roared up the hill; it slowed down when I was still fifty yards from the gate, and the girl jumped for it.

"It didn't even stop—in a second she'd climbed over the side, plopped down on the cushions at the back, and the car was tearing up the hill in a cloud of dust. I reached the gate just as it disappeared from sight.

"The thing she had dropped was a little black notebook—one of those loose-leaf ones, and the pages were covered with close type.

"I walked back to the restaurant and ordered another drink. Of course, I suppose I ought not to have read the contents of my find, but I bet most people would have done the same in the circumstances. Anyhow, I did, and jolly interesting reading it was.

"There were pages and pages of it, all about reducing the figure. Doctor So-and-so's safe and certain 'course' for getting rid of obesity. Here and there were pasted in pictures of sylph-like darlings who were said once to have had seven chins; the left-hand page was in Spanish and the opposite one a translation in English right through the book, so I had no difficulty in reading it.

"At first I was completely stuck. Lord knows the golden girl had no need of that sort of tripe; but I soon tumbled to it—the thing

was a code, and the one kind of code which it is impossible to decipher unless you have the key. I had the whole outfit.

"You may have heard of the sort of thing I mean; the Germans used it a lot in the war. It's a tremendously elaborate business, because you have to have some sort of commercial concern in both countries to start with, and you have to think out most carefully all the different things you might wish to ask or replies to the other chap's questions; then you compile the equivalent in terms of your code.

"For instance, I'm in Germany, and I want to know how many planes are being turned out per month by a certain factory. I draft an advertisement with the usual drivel, but I put in a statement that Flora Fatface lost fourteen pounds in a month, and I send it to a general advertising agency for insertion in a certain English paper. You read it, turn up what it means in your little book, and draft another advertisement for insertion in a German paper giving the required information in the form of 'Overlopping Lizzie weighed fifteen stone when she was twenty'. Of course, it had to be done through the neutral Press in the war. In this case that wasn't necessary

"When I'd read that little book there was nothing I didn't know about the things in which the Spanish Royalists were interested. I got terribly excited.

"I have always been crazy about lost causes, especially when there are kings with real personality concerned. If I'd lived in the days of the civil wars, the fact that I'd been born as some poor little devil of an over-taxed tradesman would never have stopped me brandishing a cudgel for the King, and I had always regarded Alfonso as a great man—I am the King of all the Spaniards—you know the sort of thing. Not one of these measly little républicans can hold a candle to him. Have you ever seen him? He's a tiny chap, but there's only one man worth looking at when he's about. He's a king that is a king in every sense of the word, with all the debonair charm and courage of our Charles II. They've got the same blood, if it comes to that; he's a Bourbon, and Charles II was Henry of Navarre's grandson.

"Well, the golden girl was mixed up in some Royalist conspiracy, there wasn't a doubt about that, and if she needed any help to re-establish S. M. il Rey she could count me in. I carefully pocketed the little book.

"The next problem was how to find the girl again. I questioned the tired waiter, but he couldn't tell me a thing, so I drove back to the Ritz, killed the evening at a cinema, and had another early night.

"Next morning I drove out again to Ponce de Leon, the theory being that she'd probably return to look for her missing book. I sat there drinking iced beer in the sunshine, and sure enough she did.

"I let her hunt around by the lily pool for a bit, and then I strolled down towards her. She saw me coming, and gave me a queer sort of look. I think she suspected at once that I'd got it; anyhow, she stood there waiting till I came up.

"It's jolly hot here, isn't it?" I said, just as I had done the day before.

"She shrugged her shoulders, and said at once, 'Please, have you seen my little book?'

"I thought I would be a clever Dick, so I didn't give it to her. I just asked what reward she was offering for its recovery. You should have seen those tawny eyes grow scornful as she opened her bag.

"I smiled at her. 'I don't mean money,' I said, 'but will you have some lunch with me on the terrace if I return your book?'

"'You have it?' she replied quickly; 'it is mine—please give it back.'

"'But is it? Could you prove it if I took it to the police?' I said, and directly I'd said it I could have bitten my tongue out; it was a rotten thing to say. In fact, I suddenly felt that I was behaving like an utter outsider in forcing myself on the girl through her misfortune, but you must remember that I'd gone completely off my rocker from the very first moment I set eyes on her, 'and all's fair in love and war'.

"I was just going to apologize and give her back her book when she said quickly: 'If I take *déjeuner* with you, you give me back my book?—*Parola Inglese*?'

"That means 'on the word of an Englishman'; it's an expression still used in Spain, and dates back to the Peninsula War.

"Well, I agreed like a shot, and we walked up to the restaurant—but she had her own back on me. She lunched with me, it's true, but I never had a duller meal. I did my damndest to amuse her, and talked till I was sick, but a perpetual monologue becomes embarrassing, and after a bit I began to feel a complete fool; she just sat there and wouldn't say a word.

"I tried as tactfully as I could when the waiter was inside to let her know how splendid I thought she was in working for the King, and how my sympathies were all with him. You see, by my gaff about the police I had given it away already that I knew the contents of the book, but she wouldn't open up.

"After lunch she went inside to telephone while I paid the bill; when she came back I handed her the book. Ten minutes later the Hispano roared up the hill and stopped outside the gate. I walked down the slope with her just to see her off, but I didn't attempt to suggest another meeting. By that time I was silent and dejected, and I knew it was no good. I felt completely squashed.

"When we reached the gate I did summon up the courage to say: 'I'm afraid I've been an awful bore and behaved very badly, but if you were me you'd know just how I felt.'

"Suddenly she changed completely and became human for the first time. Her eyes filled with delicious laughter, and she gave me the most glorious smile. 'Poor Englishman,' she said, 'I have punished you, but you are rather a sweet! Good-bye.'

"Before I could say another word she was in the car and it was racing up the hill, while I stood there gaping in the dust.

"When I'd collected my wits a bit, I began to wonder what to do. On the one hand I was fed up with Barcelona, and was thinking of clearing out next day—on the other I wanted terribly to see the golden girl again. By the time I'd driven back to the town I'd made up my mind to stay. That marvellous hair made her such a striking figure

that there must be people in the town who knew her, and I thought it a likely line to try the barbers' shops.

"The idea was a good one, and my third shot brought me luck. Her barber was a gay dog—his eyes fairly twinkled as he told me what he knew about her. She was Donna Cázalia D'Avila, and her father was a marquis. They had both gone into exile with the King, and she had come back quite recently when things had quieted down; she was living in their big villa outside the town.

"I got the address, then I rushed off and bought the loveliest basket of flowers I could find. I wrote on a card, 'From a very repentant Cavalier', and slipped it in. She could take that which way she liked, you see, then I had it sent off by special messenger.

"A couple of hours later I went in to have a look at the Thé Dansant, and I hadn't been sitting there more than ten minutes when in she came. She was with a fat, unwholesome-looking dago, and I wondered if there would be trouble if I sent over and asked her for a dance. It seemed queer that she was there at all, really, because as I've told you, no respectable girl ever goes. I felt certain that it must be some secret service business that brought her there—perhaps she was pumping the dago chap. He looked a most unpleasant brute.

"I decided that it would be better not to risk it, for she must have seen me. All the same, I slipped out for five minutes and wrote a note—just asking if she wouldn't take pity on me and dine that night or lunch next day. I added my room number as well as my name in case she telephoned, so that there could be no mistake.

"I didn't send it over by the waiter, but kept it in my hand and took a chance as they went out. The dago stopped to settle his bill at the *caisse*, as is the custom there, and she walked past him into the hall. I was beside her in a moment, and pressed the note into her hand.

"'Those flowers, they were glorious, but you should not have sent them,' she said in a quick whisper, then she turned away. I went upstairs with my heart fairly bounding in my chest—I really felt that I was gaining ground. After that I sat tight in my room for a bit, hoping she would ring up or send a reply to my note. I was far too excited to settle down to a book, and just fidgeted around.

"It must have been about nine o'clock when there came abruptly a quick double knock on my door. I thought it might be a page with a message, so I ran to open it, but it wasn't a page—it was the girl herself.

"She pushed past me and shut the door, then she leant against it panting. I guessed at once that something must have gone seriously wrong; she was quite white under her golden tan, and there was a scared look in her lovely eyes.

"'Quick!' she gasped. 'Hide me—they have found out what I do here. I was mad to come to the hotel. You are English—Royalist; too, you say—you will not give me up?'

"'Was it likely that I'd give her up—not for all the Communists in Spain! 'Come on,' I said, 'in here,' and seizing her by the arm I pushed her into the big wardrobe—the hanging part where all my suits were kept.

"There was a chorus of excited voices outside in the corridor, and then a knocking on the door. I opened it again, and a floor waiter, two policemen, a manager, and the fat Dago came in. They were chattering together in Spanish like a lot of parrots. The manager asked me if I'd seen the girl, and of course I looked completely blank, so they hurried off to search the other rooms.

"The girl came out of the wardrobe as I locked the door, and I handed her the key. She had recovered from her fright and smiled divinely as she thanked me. She began to tell me the trouble she was in.

"Her voice was as golden as her hair, and she spoke English with only the faintest trace of accent, which made it sound the most adorable language.

"She told me that the Dago she'd been with was a big boy in the new Catalonian Government, and a terrific Red; she'd been playing him up in the hope of getting certain information, but it hadn't come off.

"They had gone upstairs to the lounge after they'd left the Thé Dansant, and while they were sitting there a packet of papers had been brought to him from his office. She had felt certain that among them was the thing she wanted, so when he went over to speak to a friend she pinched it. He spotted her—she lost her head and bolted up the stairs. By this time they would know that she was a Royalist agent.

"I asked her what would happen if she were caught, and she looked pretty glum. 'Five years,' she said, 'five years in a fortress—I think I would rather die!'—and with a little shudder she sat down on the sofa.

"I felt pretty useless as I stood there looking down on her lovely golden head. What the dickens could I do to help her? I hadn't got the faintest idea.

"'Look here,' I said quickly, 'you'll have to get out of the country. How? Lord alone knows, but you can count on me in any way you like.'

"She caught my hand and pressed it. 'I know,' she said, 'I know,' and then she went on to say how sorry she was that she'd been rude to me the day before.

"Of course I told her that I thoroughly deserved it, and asked what she meant to do next. She said that she must think about it, and that somehow she would find a way, but that I must go downstairs to dine. I suggested that I should order dinner upstairs, and that then she could share it, hiding in the bathroom while the waiter was in the room. But she would not have it; she thought it might look suspicious, and that it was better for me to go down.

"I didn't want to go a bit, but I'd had to agree; I asked her if she thought she'd be all right till I came back.

"She told me she would lock the door, and perhaps later, when all was quiet, she might be able to slip out quietly and gain the street.

"'Better not—there are sure to be people still looking for you,' I told her. 'It will be safer for you to stay here for to-night. I'll sleep

in the bathroom, then to-morrow morning I will get you some different clothes.'

"I will think of it,' she said gravely. 'You are very kind, but go now, please, or they may suspect.'

"It was agreed that when I came up I should give three raps on the door, which she locked behind me. I dined in the restaurant, and all sorts of plans were racing through my mind. I was worried, though, for I hadn't really much faith in my suggestion for the following day. You could try any disguise you liked, but that hair would give it away every time.

"After I'd finished dinner I sat in the lounge for a bit, in case anyone was watching me, then I went upstairs. I gave the signal we'd agreed on, but she didn't let me in. I tried again, and then a third time, but I couldn't hear a sound, so I turned the handle. The door opened—she had disappeared.

"The room looked as if it had been ransacked by a burglar. My bags had been gone through, all the drawers turned upside down, and my clothes scattered about the bed. I walked over to the dressing-table and there, on the floor, were all those lovely golden curls!

"I guessed at once what Cazalia had done—cropped that tell-tale hair, stolen one of my suits, and slipped out of the hotel dressed as a man. I was right—my blue lounge suit was missing—shirt, collar, tie, socks, shoes, and the soft black hat that I wear in the evening when I'm abroad. I chuckled, thinking what a lot of pluck the girl had got, but I was worried when I found that my passport had disappeared. I thought it might be difficult to get another.

"Then I found her note—she had left it pinned on my pillow; I snatched it up and I can remember the contents now.

"*'Dear Englishman,*

"Thank you for your kindness and generosity. Forgive please that I do not stay to make my thanks. Without your help I might have paid with my life for my devotion to the cause of S. M. el Rey.

"Cazalia d'Avila.'

"I collected every piece of her lovely hair, and put it in my collar-box; then I tidied up and went to bed, but I didn't sleep for a long time.

"Would she ever get across the frontier, I was wondering. Perhaps she might slip through with my soft hat well pulled down over her eyes; she had a boyish figure and was just about my height. There was something similar, too, in the shape of our chins, but there the resemblance ended. Perhaps if she caught the night train she would stand a chance; they would probably be watching for her at the station but hardly at the frontier yet, and gone was that fatal mark of identity—the lovely golden curls. I wondered if I should ever see her again. I hoped she might endeavour to return my clothes—if she did, that would give me the chance to get in touch with her, perhaps; with that slight hope I dropped off to sleep.

"In the morning, while I was still in bed, I received a visit from the manager, and I got a nasty shock. It seemed that the police were

convinced that Cazalia was still in the hotel—or, if not, had changed her clothes in some room before she bolted. The rooms in my corridor were to be searched.

"I only had a second, while he spoke to someone in the corridor, but the collar-box with Cazalia's hair in it was on the table by my bed. I picked it up and chucked it on top of the wardrobe, then I opened the drawer where I had put all the clothes that she had left behind and seized the lot, hoping to get them out of sight before the police came in—it was too late; they caught me good and proper with the bundle in my hands.

"Of course, after that I couldn't say a thing; they searched and rummaged into everything I had, and nearly the first thing they came across was her letter—that did it! I couldn't even say she'd gone off in my clothes without my knowledge, which was the truth, as she'd talked about my help and her devotion to the King.

"I dressed myself while they stood round, and directly I'd finished they handcuffed me and marched me off to prison. I realized that I had landed myself in an appalling mess.

"That prison was the devil. Only an hour's exercise a day, no books or papers, filthy food and so full of garlic that it nearly made me sick, and, of course, no baths.

"The British Consul came along to see me; he seemed a decent chap, but he looked pretty grim. You see, I'd been caught out assisting in a Royalist conspiracy, and the fact that I was a Briton didn't make much odds. It looked as if I was in for a couple of years, at least. The Consul got a lawyer who came to see me several times, but he said he couldn't get me off—he could only try for a minimum sentence, and if things went really badly I might get seven years! . . . I was in the deuce of a stew.

"I wonder you didn't see the case in the papers, because of course it got into the Press. I thought I should go dotty when I'd been there a week, and the only relief I had from thinking was when people came to see me. I will say they were decent about that. The people that I'd stayed with in Madrid came to Barcelona, and I was allowed to see them as often as I liked; they used to come at all hours, and the warder brought them straight to my cell. There was no rotten business of being separated from visitors by an open space, and two wire fences with a warder in between, as we have here, but of course the Spanish prison system is thoroughly old-fashioned! They have bolts the size of battering-rams, and a sentry on the gate, but only about one jailer to every fifty prisoners, and they're so casual they'll even let you walk down the passage to the wash-place on your own.

"I knew, though, that when my trial came on I should be sent off to a fortress or a penal settlement, and mixed up with all the other felons. It was a frightful prospect, but somehow I couldn't blame the girl. The more I thought of her the more adorable she seemed, and idiotic though I know it sounds, I felt that the hardest thing about my imprisonment was the fact that I should stand no chance of seeing her again for years.

"I was wrong there. I did see her again, and quite soon, too.

When I'd been in that foul prison nine days I was taken to the Superintendent's office one morning, and there she was—just as devastatingly beautiful as ever. She was dressed in girl's clothes again, and her hair was as curly as ever, but not quite such a lovely shade of gold. Of course I knew it must be a wig, but most people wouldn't have noticed the difference, I suppose.

"At first I thought that she'd failed to get out of Spain, and had just been captured, but that wasn't it at all. She had read in the papers of my arrest, and come back to give herself up.

"I wasn't given much chance to talk to her, but that was the gist of it, and for the moment I was too staggered to think clearly. She took entire responsibility, and as I was a foreigner they accepted her assurance that I wasn't really mixed up in the conspiracy. They gave me a pretty sharp lecture on the error of my ways and let me go.

"I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. I was almost stupid with relief at the thought of the horrors I had escaped; but there was Cazalia, and she'd have to go through that hell instead.

"Think of the courage of that girl, coming back and giving herself up deliberately to get me off! She knew, too, that she would get five years at least—just think what five years in prison would mean to a girl like that: the food and the filth and the other women—ghastly creatures—the dregs of Barcelona. I darn nearly broke down when I got back to the hotel."

Oliver was silent for a moment. "Poor kid," I said, "how long did she actually get?"

He laughed suddenly, and laid his hand on the casket. "She didn't get anything—the hair saved us."

"What *do* you mean?"

"When I got back to the hotel," Oliver said slowly, "I managed to secure my old room; the collar-box was just where I left it, and when I was looking at that lovely hair I got an idea." He paused.

"Yes," I said impatiently, "go on."

"I did a bit of shopping, and I dashed off to Anita—the little girl I'd picked up at the Thé Dansant. I knew she was in need of money and had Royalist sympathies as well. It was an old-fashioned prison, so we planned the thing in the good old-fashioned way. Anita was allowed to see Cazalia—she gave her my parcel, and Cazalia tied her up. Five minutes later we were driving like the devil for the mountains. We ditched the car a couple of miles from the frontier, and crossed into France on foot that night. It was a risky business, but we pulled it off."

"But the guard," I exclaimed. "How on earth could they confuse her with Anita?"

"Why, her hair, of course," laughed Oliver. "The police didn't know she had a wig. I sent in a black one—they never recognized her without her golden curls! Out you go, my boy, I've got to change—I'm dining with her at half-past eight."

STORY X

ANOTHER LITTLE EPISODE FROM THE ACTIVITIES OF 'THE MAN WITH the Girlish Face' in the early days of the present war.

Hampstead is a long cry from Monte Carlo, but in 1939 its population was almost as cosmopolitan. I lived nearby in St. John's Wood, and the majority of foreigners who then frequented those parts could hardly claim to have distinguished themselves by their exquisite politeness.

Why is it I wonder that so many foreigners in exile display such appalling manners. Even in Germany, where I have travelled extensively, apart from the comparatively small caste of Prussian Officers who were deliberately educated to push civilians off the pavements if they did not get out of the way in time, the bulk of the people were by no means impolite. I suspect that much of this aggressive boorishness is begotten by an inverted inferiority complex arising as the natural reaction to prolonged and often intensive persecution; so I suppose we should be as forbearing as we can with these unbidden and, one hopes, transitory guests. In any case, London was unexpectedly relieved of most of the strangers within her gates in September 1940; they set out once more upon their tragic odysseys as soon as the bombs began to fall.

How the war has changed since I wrote this story! Our hero—to employ an archaic but most useful phrase—just walked into a tobacconist's and asked for a packet of Players, and the girl gave them to him. What is more she wrapped them up; and in those days they could not have cost him more than elevenpence-halfpenny for twenty. Still, the war is some thirty-one months nearer its conclusion than it was then; and my bet is that we now have only one-third of the time to go before its finish that elapsed between the writing of this note and the war's beginning. Work that one out if you like!

DEATH IN THE FLAG

VIVIEN PAWLETT-BROWNE—or plain V. Brown as he was on the register of Sir Charles Forsyth's department—thought that he had never seen his chief look grimmer. It was Sir Charles's chill manner as much as his snow-white hair that had earned him the name of 'Frosty', and this morning he was as icy as a Finnish blizzard.

"Seen that?" he asked, pushing a newspaper-cutting across his desk. And Vivien read:

CASE OF BUBONIC PLAGUE REPORTED IN NORTH LONDON

Miss Sara Neilson, employed as a housemaid at 104 Maresfield Gardens, N.W.3, was suddenly taken ill yesterday and the Hampstead Fever Hospital have diagnosed the case as one of Bubonic Plague. Miss Neilson was removed at once to the isolation ship

in the Thames estuary. Cases of this terrible disease are rare in England. The last . . .

"Well, sir?" Vivien raised his eyes. They were amazingly quick when no longer screened by those long, curling lashes that had caused so many people to dub him an effeminate young fool. He'd failed every examination for which he'd ever sat; yet those eyes had induced old 'Frosty' to give him a chance in the only Government department where no examinations are required.

"Damnable business," said Sir Charles. "As this was a civilian case we couldn't stop it from getting into the papers."

"There have been others, then?"

"Yes; six in the last week. The girl must have caught it from one of them. They're all Service men, balloon-barrage aircraftsmen or anti-aircraft gunners, and all of them were stationed in North London. This menace is being spread deliberately; but even the Nazis wouldn't stoop as low as this. It must be some Hitler-worshipping maniac working on his own. Here's a list of the men; they're all on the isolation ship. Go and see what you can find out—and for God's sake do it quickly."

That afternoon, swathed from head to foot in a white overall and a mask of medicated gauze, Vivien questioned the semi-conscious victims on the isolation ship; but on his way back he had to admit to himself that he learned little of any value. One of the men had been walking-out with Sara Neilson, but they were all complete strangers to each other. None of them had been down to the docks where they might have been bitten by a plague-rat or caught it off some coloured seaman from the East, and they had all led very normal lives at their respective depots, spending their off-time in cinemas, at the dogs, in pubs or at home with their families.

The following morning Sir Charles telephoned to say that another case had been reported in Aldershot. So Vivien went down to the ship again to be there when the latest victim was brought in.

Once again the results proved disappointing. The man had had twelve hours' leave two days before. He had gone straight to his home in Hampstead, visited a cinema with his widowed mother, and talked to no one else whilst in London except when he had bought some cigarettes and taken a book out of the local '2d. Library' on his way to the station. So, having taken the address of the tobacconist and the library, Vivien wished him a speedy recovery and departed.

That evening he took a bus up to Hampstead, and following the soldier's directions arrived at the tobacconist's. He asked for a packet of Player's and while the girl was wrapping them up he remarked conversationally: "Get lots of soldiers coming in here these days, don't you? Keeps you busy I expect."

She tossed her head and he saw that she was a coquettish piece. "If it were only soldiers I wouldn't mind—it's the refugees I can't abide."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I don't mind telling you it's quite a treat to serve an English

customer. The Gateway to the Continent; that's what we call these parts now—and the way these foreigners carry on," she continued, warming to her theme. "They don't think twice about elbowing a lady off the pavement, and they never so much as say 'pardon', not them. Mr. Higgins—that's my boss—was sayin' only yesterday they ought to be ever so grateful for us letting them live here at all instead of behavin' as though they own the earth. The way they look at a girl, too . . ."

Vivien nodded sympathetically. "It must be rotten for you."

She smiled coyly. "Oh, well, things aren't so bad reely—I mean I've got me own friends; then sometimes I get a chat with a nice gentleman like you . . ."

Vivien blushed furiously and, satisfied that the girl's evident antipathy for foreigners together with the fact that the shop was British owned rendered it a most unlikely centre for treasonable activities, made his escape.

He was still slightly flushed when he reached the 2d. Library. It was fairly full, so whilst waiting his turn he went round the shelves and, in the pretence of looking for a book, watched the greasy, bespectacled little man serving behind the counter. The librarian was definitely non-Aryan and spoke with a heavy accent. When it was Vivien's turn he handed over the book of his choice and said:

"I was recommended this thriller. I suppose I'm lucky to find a copy in now there are so many soldiers about. They all go for the latest thrillers, don't they?"

"Some, sir, not all. Twopence, pless—excuse."

The busy librarian turned to a young man in khaki who had come to the shop a few minutes after Vivien.

Having glanced at the title of the soldier's selection he held it up for Vivien to see. It was *How Green was my Valley*, a serious novel of great beauty and power. Then, turning back to the soldier, he said: "One moment, pless," and went through a door at the back of the shop.

When he returned he was pushing a small silk Union Jack between the leaves of the book. "Jus' a book-marker—a little present for you," his wizened face creased into a smile as he returned the book to the soldier.

"Don't I get one?" Vivien asked.

"No, no; they're for our brave boys only. I am a refugee from Nazi persecution and I would to show . . ." Before he could finish Vivien snatched the book from the astonished young soldier and grabbing the librarian by the scruff of his neck pushed him into the back room. There, on a table against one wall, were a row of glass test-tubes, the lower parts of which were opaque with bacilli cultures, a sterilizing apparatus, and beside it a neat little pile of silk Union Jacks.

With one heave Vivien pitched the little man head foremost into the row of test tubes so that they shivered to fragments, making a score of cuts upon his face.

"I'm not charging you for the moment," he said, "but I will if you ever come off the isolation ship."

STORY XI

IT WAS NOT UNTIL LONG AFTER I HAD WRITTEN THIS STORY THAT I first saw Athens, from a giant seaplane. Later I came to it again from Egypt, and stayed there for some time.

Had I written the story after my visit I should certainly not have made the Greek workman in it such a villainous character. There are, of course, black sheep in every race, and it is stupid to pretend otherwise. That is why it is particularly silly for people to write to authors, as they sometimes do, expressing the strongest resentment or a personal grievance that one has portrayed one of their countrymen as the villain in a book. All fiction characters are imaginary, anyhow, and to paint a foreigner, or an Englishman for that matter, as an unscrupulous blackguard is no reflection whatever on his race.

But this is a special case. Among all the countries in which I have travelled I have found the Greeks unique in their attitude to tourists—and this story concerns tourists. The Greeks are so proud of their lovely country and its magnificent contribution to civilization that their greatest joy is to show it to their visitors. They even refuse to take tolls from tourists who use their roads, and the Greek guides bring their charges presents of flowers, fruit, and wine for which they will take no payment. Therefore it is more than usually unlikely that a Greek workman would have sought to prey on foreigners as this one did in the tale.

Athens always reminds me of an amusing episode that occurred when I was there. The First Secretary of our Legation received my wife and myself very kindly, and one night during the Carnival he and his wife took us out to see the fun in a popular restaurant, together with the son of the Court Chamberlain.

Great merriment prevailed, and there was much throwing of paper streamers together with, a thing that I have never seen elsewhere—wax eggs of many colours containing confetti, which broke quite harmlessly upon one's head. I'm sure the number of those eggs we used cost our host far more than the dinner.

Anyhow, about one in the morning, although the fun was still at its height, our party got up to leave. Immediately the band stopped the dance tune it was playing and broke into the British National Anthem, while every soul in the place got to their feet and cheered as though they meant to lift the roof off.

As the only woman guest my wife went out first, bowing her acknowledgments for the unexpected courtesy to right and left, while the rest of us, looking a little self-conscious, trailed after her.

When we were outside I said to my host: "All the Greeks we've met have been charming to us, but I didn't realize that they are so fond of the English that they give them public ovations."

"They don't," he replied. "At least, I've never known them do so before, although we're certainly very popular. I was a little startled myself, and I don't quite understand it."

Next morning we had the explanation. Princess Mary had arrived the previous afternoon on a visit to King George of Greece. My wife is not the least like Princess Mary to look at, but about the same age, and seeing her seated between a British diplomat and the son of the Court Chamberlain, the crowd in the restaurant had mistaken her for the Princess.

It is nice to think, though, that quite a number of Greeks must have gone home that night with the happy illusion that they had been hit in the eye by a wax egg sent with unerring aim by the King of England's sister.

ATHENIAN GOLD

"Of course," I remarked casually, "there is no doubt that there *are* cases in which appropriating other people's money is justified."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl with the blue eyes.

I smiled my very nicest smile as I answered her question. It had taken no little skill on my part to manœuvre her a little way away from the rest of the party, which was being shown over the Acropolis.

"Didn't you know?"—with an airy gesture I included the Colonnade of the Parthenon, the Temple of Niki, and the Carytides of the Erechtheion—"all these were built with stolen money."

She shook her charming head. "The guide just said that they were built by Pericles—wasn't he the King of Athens in those days?"

I laughed. "Lord Mayor would be nearer the mark; he pinched all the money to build these wonderful places out of the rates—he would have got seven years for embezzlement in these days; as it was, there was no end of a rumpus, but he had finished the job before they found him out."

She favoured me with a most delicious smile, so I was encouraged to go on. "Think of all the millions we pay in rates every year in London—ten bob in the pound, and in Poplar it got to twenty-two and sixpence before someone put a stop to it—and what have we to show for it? Not a single thing. Old Pericles wanted to make his city beautiful, and the other aldermen were just about as stuffy and as narrow as ours are to-day, so he purloined the cash and left us these lovely things to marvel at."

"That *is* interesting," she said.

By this time we had dropped quite a way behind the others, and I did not mean that we should catch them up for a bit, if it was in my power to prevent it. I had seen her the night before in the lounge, so I knew she was staying in the same hotel. Now was my golden opportunity to 'get acquainted', as the Americans say.

I racked my brain for any odd bits of information about the Greeks that might have stuck there. I didn't know much, but it was

more than she did, and enough, anyhow, to retain her interest until we could get on to the safer ground of holidays in general, and where she liked dancing best in London.

The ice was nicely broken by the time we were walking down the giant staircase of the Prophylaeer. Our motor-coach was waiting some little distance from the bottom, and the people were climbing in. A stout woman called in a querulous voice: "Do come along, Venice, dear," and the girl at my side hurried forward.

"So her name is Venice—what a lovely name," I thought, and how splendidly it suited her. Those eyes—the blue of the Adriatic was never more dazzling, and the dark curling hair under the wide-brimmed hat—Venetian night! Of course we had to separate and take our respective seats in the big coach. I cursed the stupid rhapsodies of the little woman in the giglamps who sat on one side of me and the lunatic American who occupied the other. He said: "He didn't reckon the Ar-cropolis was anything to go bats about—the Capitol in Washington had it beat by a long sight." They got involved in a heated argument with myself as a kind of no man's land: how I wished they would both shut up! I wanted peace and quiet to think about Venice—I wanted to think about Venice lots and lots.

On the way back to the hotel we pulled up at the 'Tower of the Winds'. I lost not a moment. Directly the guide began his discourse I shook off the woman with the specs. and edged round to where Venice was standing. To my disgust I found she was talking to a little square, red-faced chap. I had seen him with her in the lounge the night before, so I had to bide my time.

The guide moved on; like a flock of sheep the party followed, I seized my chance. "Have you seen the tombs?" I said.

"Are there any here?" she asked, surprised.

"Rather," I assured her. The Tower was set in a small garden which boasted only a few dwarf acacias, sprouting among the lumps of fallen stone. I pointed to the far end. "They're over there."

The red-faced man had drifted forward with the rest of the gaping crowd; Venice walked beside me over the dusty grass. We passed through a ring of broken columns, and I glanced quickly from side to side, fervently praying that I might find something which I could tell her was a tomb.

"Those are the tombs," I said, with a sigh of relief, as I pointed in the direction of some cave-like holes with iron gratings across, which I had spotted in the garden wall.

"How very interesting," Venice smiled politely, but there was a sweet merriment in her blue eyes. I could see she didn't believe me, and she went on quietly: "Do you know, I had an idea that the Athenians buried their dead outside the city! In fact, we went to see the street of tombs yesterday afternoon."

"Ah, those are very special ones," I answered quickly, and I hastened to change the subject. "I wonder what those vandals are going to put up on the other side of the wall?"

"It seems a sin to build anything here, doesn't it?" she agreed. "Look, they've even cut a trench through into the garden."

We strolled over to the trench—half a dozen dusty Greek labourers were digging in the far end of it; farther off a crowd of them were struggling with an enormous boiler. They were trying to get it into its place amongst the already completed cement foundations.

A little fat man in an absurd bowler hat stood on a pile of masonry giving instructions. We stood watching for a moment.

Just as we were about to turn away, Venice prodded the side of the trench with the point of her parasol.

"What's that?" she said.

I looked, and the dull gleam of metal caught my eye. "By Jove," I exclaimed, "I believe you've had a find!" I stooped quickly and picked it up from the place where it rested on the lip of a small hole opened up by the earth being cut away. It was a gold coin, dull with the grime of centuries; but as I rubbed it with my thumb it shone! It was gold, right enough—gold never tarnishes.

"What fun!" she cried. "Do let me look."

I passed it to her. I think I was even happier than she was—it only needed a little thing like that for us to become really friendly.

"I wonder if there are any more in that hole?" I said suddenly. "Some old fellow may have buried a horde there ages ago."

"Do see—we'll go shares if there are," exclaimed Venice, the generous darling.

I was just going to stoop down when I caught sight of one of the Greek labourers watching me. "Hide it!" I said. "Quickly."

She slipped it into her palm and gave me a puzzled look. "Why?" she asked.

"Got to be careful," I explained; "there's sure to be some rotten law about all treasure trove being the property of the State in a place like this, and that chap's got his eye on us—times have changed since Lord Elgin got away with the Parthenon marbles."

"Did he?" she laughed. "How did he do that?"

"The Parthenon was almost perfect till two hundred years ago; then the fool Turks used it to store gunpowder in. One fine night it blew up, and most of the figures tumbled off in bits and pieces. Old Elgin came along a hundred years later and picked up the fragments. Not content with that, he pinched most of the figures that were still intact on the frieze; they're in a special room at the British Museum to-day."

"Of course; the famous Elgin Marbles; yes, I've seen them, but however did he get them away?"

I had one eye on the Greek, but he was still watching us. "He just walked off with them," I answered. "You could do that sort of thing in those days; he jolly nearly lost the lot, though. They were so heavy that the ship he chartered to bring them home sank in the harbour, here; they were several years at the bottom of the sea, too, before he could get them up!"

"I wish that workman would get on with his job," she said impatiently. "I'm dying to see if there are any more coins in that hole."

"'Ot, ain't it, Guv'nor?"

I looked up quickly; the little man in the bowler hat had approached us along the wall. He was mopping his round head with a red-and-white spotted handkerchief. I suppose I looked surprised. One hardly expects to be addressed in broad Cockney by the foreman of a gang of labourers in Athens!

"You're right," I said; "it can't be much fun working in this heat, it's bad enough just rushing from place to place seeing things." And in fact the heat was grilling—the sun streamed down from a cloudless sky, so that the glare of it on the white stones pained one's eyes.

"Wish I was back in Blighty," he went on. "Steak and onions an' a pint o' bitter aside the fire on a foggy dye—that's wot I'd like ter see."

"What are you doing in Athens?" I asked.

"Sent art by the firm, I was," he grumbled. "Said it 'ud be a six weeks' job, they did, an' it's darn near six munfs—these here Greeks 'as a hidea that work's bad fer their 'ealth, I reckon. I wouldn't stick it but what it's decent pay."

"What sort of work are you doing?" Venice inquired.

"Bilers," he replied. "Bilers, Miss, them's my line; these 'ere dagoes don't know nuffin' abart bilers, an' we 'as to teach 'em. It ain't 'arf a job, too. They jest stares at yer wiv their big, black eyes and chews their beastly garlic—they smells somepin' 'orrid."

I was quite sorry for the little man, but I wished he would go away. I was terribly anxious to investigate our hole.

"Ain't seen no golden coins abart, 'ave yer?" he asked suddenly.

I quickly denied all knowledge of our find. Venice was smiling sweetly in the direction of the party who were walking across the garden towards us; she gave the impression that she had not heard the question.

"Well, if yer ain't, yer ain't; I was only wonderin'," remarked the little Cockney with a grin; "but if you *does*—me nime's Tubby 'Arris—yer might remember that if yer gits inter any trouble!"

"Thanks," I said a little vaguely. I didn't see any reason to suppose that we should get into any trouble, and I didn't quite see how Mr. Harris would help us if we did!

"So long, Guv'nor, and good mornin' ter yer, Miss"; he touched his hat politely as we turned to go. "It's a reel treat ter 'ear a Christian voice in this 'ere plice."

The party had come up now, and our chance had gone to rummage in that tantalizing hole. Venice turned away from the trench with a little look of disappointment, but I leant towards her and whispered: "We'll come back later."

She brightened at once. "Yes, let's—after dinner this evening. Quick! What's your name?—I'd better introduce you to mother."

"Tony Burbridge," I sighed, as I braced myself. Why is it that all lovely girls are cursed with mothers?

That afternoon Venice was going for a picnic to Mount Lycabettus, which overlooks the town. I saw nothing more of her until

the evening, but her adorable face was never out of my mind, and I was gloating over her suggestion that we should go on our treasure hunt together after dinner. It was tantamount to an admission, too, that she had noticed me the night before, and knew that I was staying in the same hotel.

When dinner was over, I sought her out at once; the band had already started, and I asked her to dance. Mama proved quite affable on closer acquaintance, and her father seemed a fine old sportsman. I had followed up the introduction of the morning by standing him a drink before dinner.

"Have you told them anything?" I asked at once, directly we were on the floor.

"Not a thing," she said; "it would spoil half the fun."

I grinned; she looked quite fascinating in her flimsy evening dress— even more adorable than in the morning, if that were possible.

"There won't be trouble if you slip away?" I inquired.

She shook her dark head. "We'll sit with them for a bit," she suggested, "then dance again; then I'll slip upstairs and get a coat while you find a car. I'll meet you in front of the hotel."

We followed her plan, and half an hour later we were bumping along the uneven streets towards the Tower of the Winds.

When we got there we told the taxi-man to wait about a hundred yards down the road, then tried the garden gate; of course the wretched thing was locked, but we weren't going to let that stop us. The road is higher than the garden, and has a criss-cross iron railing with a drop of about six feet on the other side.

"Go on," said Venice, "what are you waiting for?"

"Do you think you can manage it?" I said doubtfully.

"Of course I can," she answered.

I helped her over the fence, and dropped down into the garden on the other side; then I stood ready to catch her as she landed, and catch her I did, a delicious bundle of perfumed loveliness.

I held her in my arms for a good bit longer than was strictly necessary, then she wriggled away with a little laugh.

"This is a treasure hunt," she said demurely.

"I know," I said, a little breathlessly, "but you're the treasure."

"On the contrary, I'm a gold digger!" she laughed. "Come on."

We almost ran across the garden to the trench, holding hands like two kids, and there was the hole just as we'd left it. I plunged in my hand. "We've got it," I said, as my fingers closed over some coins. I drew them out—they were gold. I gave them to Venice, and thrust in my hand again—out came some more—I fumbled round and got a third lot. The hole wasn't very deep. It seemed we had got them all. After raking it most carefully I only got a couple more.

Venice sat down on a fluted pillar that was half buried in the grass; the coins were in her lap—she counted them.

"Twenty-four," she said, with a little note of disappointment in her voice.

"Never mind, they're gold, and if they're old ones they're worth more than the value of the metal," I consoled her.

She laughed. "Well, it's quite a find, anyway. Let's go back to the hotel and clean them up—then we'll divide the spoils."

"Why hurry?" I said. "It's lovely here," and it was quite glorious in that garden. A real hot Southern night; the stars were shining in myriads overhead. I wanted to hear lots of things about Venice, and I thought it was just the place to tell her earnestly how lovely I thought she was.

She shook her head. "No, we'll go back now; if you're very, very nice to me perhaps I'll let you walk round the hotel garden with me afterwards."

"I'm always nice," I said.

"Then help me up this rotten wall," she laughed.

It wasn't easy getting out of that garden, but we managed it, and praise be the Lord without tearing Venice's frock. I got my clothes covered with dust, though. We found our taxi, and soon were back in the hotel. I got the porter to brush me down, then I joined Venice in the reading-room; it was quiet there.

She had spread out the coins on a table; they were different sizes, and most of them incrustated with dirt, but they were an interesting little lot.

"We had better toss for first choice," she said, "then we'll choose alternately—this is fun!" She smiled right into my eyes.

I produced a coin from my pocket, but just at that moment a waiter came in. He walked straight over to our table and was followed by another man. Venice tried to cover the gold with her hands and arms.

"Dis man, sir, 'e insist to see you," said the waiter. "'E not know your name, but 'e make description of you and de ladi."

With a little shock I recognized the bronzed face of the man we had seen working in the trench; I felt sure we were in for trouble. "All right," I told the waiter, "you can go."

The workman stood there grinning—he had a marvellous mouthful of white teeth, but it was not a friendly grin.

"What do you want?" I asked curtly.

He sat down unasked, with his greasy hat in his hands—he breathed heavily as though he had been running. I caught a whiff of his breath and had to turn away my head; he simply reeked of garlic.

"You finda da antique?" he said, nodding at the coins.

"Well," I said, "what about it?"

"'Gainst da law," he nodded, "alla antique belonga Government—big fine for tourist taka antique."

Well, of course I knew the brute had got me; nobody's allowed to take anything from anywhere these days. I suppose it's quite right, really, otherwise people would be pillaging all sorts of things; but I think it's a bit unfair if you find something actually buried in the earth as we had done.

"Biga fine for tourist," the Greek went on. "Five hundred pound you pay, yes? when I speaka police."

"Five hundred pounds!" I gasped. I'd only got a credit of fifty

with Cooks, and I'd stung my own bank for as much as they'd stand before I'd left England. Venice came nobly to the rescue.

"I'd better tell Daddy," she said; "it's as much my fault as yours."

"Just one minute." I put my hand on her arm, and looked at our friend in the striped shirt. "How much do you get out of this?"

"Nozing," he answered me, "nozing, but I am good fella—my brother, he Americano—I giv da antique to da police, and I say nozings—you maka me present, eh?"

So that was the game. I should just love to have hit him in the middle of his oily face, but I knew he'd got me. He had lied about the size of the fine, perhaps, but it would be a pretty stiff one, anyway, and there'd be a whole packet of trouble into which Venice would be lugged as well as myself. Better to compromise with the brute, and have done.

"How much?" I asked angrily.

"Fifty pound," he grinned. "Me good fella; I giva da antique to da police, you giva me fifty pound."

"Five," I said firmly.

He just laughed in my face, and lurched to his feet. "I go speaka da police—five 'undred pound fine you pay, five 'undred pound, too, da ladi, eh?"

"I'll give you ten," I offered. "If you won't take that you can go to the devil."

He thrust my offer aside with a wave of his dirty yellow hand. "Don't you think I ought to fetch Daddy?" asked Venice; "he's an awful dear, I'm sure he'll understand."

Perhaps he might, I thought, but I'd got myself into this rotten mess, and I felt it was up to me to get myself out of it if I could. I was thinking hard.

"Scuse, sir," the waiter had appeared again, "a Mr. 'Arris—'e call and want speak with you."

Harris! the very man. I suddenly remembered what our little Cockney friend had said. "Bring him in," I cried.

In he came, as fat and smiling as ever. "Evenin', Guv'nor," he grinned at me. "Evenin', Miss." Scowling, he turned to the Greek. "It's a fair cop this time, Morpho—'ow much you 'ad off this gent?"

"No understanda." Our first visitor shook his head uneasily.

Mr. Harris stuck out his stubby chin. "Don't understand, dontcher? I bin watchin' your little gime, an' to-night I caught yer art good and proper—you'll understand orlright when I gets a policeman. You bin saltin' that 'ole wiv the dibbs fer weeks past, an' gettin' money art o' people what picks 'em up—yer a rotten, swindlin' black-mailer, that's what you are, an' I'm goin' ter 'and you over to the police!"

In one quick movement the Greek grabbed his greasy hat, pushed Harris out of his way, and dashed through the glass doors out of the hotel.

We didn't give chase—we called for a long cool drink with gin in it for Mr. 'Tubby' Harris instead.

When that genuine bit of London town had left us I looked at Venice. "What do we do now?" I said, as I gathered up the coins. "These really belong to that rotten Greek, I suppose. Shall we let him have them if he comes back or sends for them?"

Venice gave me a bewitching smile. "Let's go into the garden and talk it over," she said, "but I think I remember someone telling me that there *are* cases in which appropriating other people's money is justified!"

STORY XII

IN THIS ADVENTURE 'THE MAN WITH THE GIRLISH FACE' IS TEMPORARILY transferred to the Army and goes out to do a job of work on the Western Front. It was written, of course, in those now distant days before the war had really got going—and Dunkirk.

Personally I greatly doubt if such a temporary transfer into one of the Services is ever carried out in practice. The officers of M.I.6 or 16 or 26 or 64, or whichever it is that deals with such matters must be perfectly capable of running their own show without calling in outside help. Therefore, should one of them chance to read this yarn I apologize here and now for inferring that his department ever had to confess defeat on such a comparatively simple issue.

The fact is, quite contrary to the flattering belief of many of my friends, I have nothing to do with any type of Secret Service. Just as in the case of the long dissertations on Strategy which have sometimes appeared in my war novels, I have no special sources of information. I read the newspapers, put two and two together and do a little quiet thinking with the aid of a very fine collection of maps; then I take a gamble on what is likely to happen next. The fact that I have quite frequently proved right is rather fun, but the sand I play with is there for anyone to build a castle if they care to take the trouble.

But I digress. The present item on the menu is, I think, a good little story.

NIGHT PATROL

SIR CHARLES FORSYTH addressed the tall, stooping figure in front of him. "As you've been making a nuisance of yourself about joining up I've decided to let you go into the Army."

"Really, sir—d'you mean that?" The absurdly long, curling lashes that normally veiled Vivien Pawlett-Browne's glance suddenly lifted, revealing his eyes quick and eager but with just a shade of suspicion in their brown depths.

"Of course not." A pale smile like wintry sunshine lit Sir Charles's rugged face. "You know quite well that your war lies in London. I haven't trained you for half a dozen years to have you shot in some damn-fool battle. I'm only lending you to the military."

Vivien sighed. "I felt sure there was a snag in it. Subversive activities in one of the camps, I suppose?"

"No. Take this chit over to the War-House, A.G.-42.n. They'll fix you up, and er—it means a trip to France."

"Thanks most awfully, sir." Beaming now, Vivien departed.

"There's a serious leakage direct from our front line," a grey-moustached G.S.O.-I at the War Office told him. "The enemy are getting everything that happens in the 12th Division almost before

we know it ourselves. It's entirely local and the area has been evacuated of civilians. That makes it pretty certain that the spy is in one of our own units. Sir Charles suggested that an outside man might stand more chance of spotting the trouble than our own fellows—fresh mind, you know." He grinned. "So for a bit you're to become one of us 'brutal and licentious' soldiery."

That night Vivien became No. 426.071 Private V. Brown, of the Rutland Light Infantry, and the following day he left with a reinforcement draft for France.

Forty-eight hours later he was walking through a deserted village, which housed some of the British advance positions, when he heard the crack of rifles. Stopping abruptly, he was about to take cover when he saw that his fears had been groundless; a few yards away on the other side of a low wall a shooting match was going on between a Garde Champêtre and a Tommy.

The Frenchman won and remarked with a laugh: "I could 'af beat you any'ow. We village policemen are also forest guard in peace-time. *Voilà!* I show you. See zat white zing in ze distance?" He pointed to an object about six hundred yards away. "It ess a ole bath-rub. Listen an' you 'ear 'im ping." Raising his rifle he fired and a second later they heard the faint ring of the bullet in answer to his boast.

Vivien looked out across no-man's-land. It seemed so quiet and peaceful in the afternoon sunshine with its gentle bush-covered hills and wooded slopes. He could not help thinking what an excellent place it would have made in which to play Red Indians, but he smiled grimly to himself as he reflected on how deceptive appearances could be; an enemy who would shoot to kill might be lurking behind any of the more distant trees, although the Bosche front line was over five miles away.

His division was only holding a small sector, and he had been attached to the Forward Brigade Intelligence Officer, so that under the guise of a runner he could move about quite freely; but any of the 3,000 men in the front line could have been the one who sneaked out to meet the Bosche half-way across no-man's-land, either at dawn or dusk when the shadows lent extra cover, yet it was not dark enough to get shot by mistake. By the end of a week Vivien felt that his task was as hopeless as looking for a needle in a haystack.

He began to haunt the outpost line at sundown and once saw the Garde Champêtre engage in another shooting match.

"Allo, Tommy, you shoot well, yes?" the Frenchman accosted a lanky private. "I make you a match. Four shots each at ze newspaper on ze rubble 'eap out zere an' ze winner get five cigarette?"

Vivien guessed who would be the victor and was not surprised when the Garde put a fifth round into the distant bath-tub for luck. It was a clever little ramp for getting English cigarettes and Vivien smiled to himself at the man's astuteness. He was certainly a remarkable shot, as he had hit the tub even in the failing light which now made no-man's-land look so mysterious and sinister.

Two nights later, bored and depressed, Vivien persuaded a subaltern

to take him out with four other men on a patrol. The officer said that there was little danger of running into the Bosche for the first two miles as the enemy rarely came more than half-way; so the party set off at a walk using the bushes as cover when they 'topped' one of the little hills and their bodies would have shown against the starlit sky-line.

They had barely gone half a mile when without warning a volley of shots rang out from a near-by coppice. Flinging themselves to the ground they returned the fire, but the Germans were much superior in numbers—Vivien thought there must have been about twenty of them, judging by the flashes of their rifles—so his little party was forced to retreat.

Cautiously, hardly daring to breathe, they began to wriggle back, only the soft rustle of the grass breaking the almost eerie quiet that had now fallen. Suddenly a loud clang shattered the silence. The Germans opened fire again and their shots whistled over Vivien's head as he turned to see what he had backed into. It was the old bath-tub. His heart in his mouth he crouched beside it for a second; then wriggled back until he regained his party.

Next morning he strolled through the village. The Garde Champêtre was lounging against a tree. As Vivien appeared he smiled.

"'Allo, Tommy, you shoot well, yes? I make you a match? Four shots each at zat old bottle on ze rubble-'eap and ze winner get five cigarette. *Hein?*'"

Vivien accepted the challenge, and with his fourth shot the Frenchman smashed the target to smithereens. "And look," he laughed complacently, "I put one in ze old bath-tub out zere. Listen an' you 'ear 'im ping."

"No you don't!" Before the astonished Frenchman had time to protest Vivien seized his rifle and extracted the cartridge clip with its one remaining bullet.

"*Mort de diable!*" screamed the Garde. "*Laissez-moi ça immédiatement!*"

Ignoring him, Vivien dropped the weapon and broke the bullet from its brass case. It came away easily, as it had been hollowed out; rammed home into the empty space was a screw of paper.

"I wondered what the Bosche were doing so close to our line's last night. They were out to collect your dud bullets from the bath-tub. It was always the fifth in your clip, wasn't it?" Vivien unslung his own rifle. "Come on, quick march, or you'll give me my last chance to use this thing before I go home."

STORY XIII

HERE AGAIN IS A STORY FROM THE ERA WHEN I WAS STILL WRAPPING wet towels round my head in an effort to produce life-like dialect—in this case an Irish brogue.

Perhaps this is the place where I should pay tribute to my masters, for, like every author, I owe much to those who have preceded me.

Alexander Dumas, the elder, was my first love as a boy, and my zest for his great historical romances has never waned; his influence upon my story-telling has certainly been more profound than any other.

John Buchan I count as the master of us all. His *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast* are perfect examples of the adventure story at its best. But owing to some intangible essence in his writing and its high quality, strive as I may, I should never succeed in reaching his standard if I lived to be a hundred.

Many reviewers have done me the honour to compare my work to that of Edgar Wallace, but even in my very early days I was not flattered. *On the Spot* and certain of his other stage productions prove him to have been a most gifted playwright, but his books, despite their brilliant intricacy of plot, leave me completely indifferent.

On the other hand, E. Phillips Oppenheim has given me many hours of tense enjoyment. Perhaps, since I compare the two, if Mr. Oppenheim will forgive me, that is because I have always been thrilled by tales of diplomatic intrigue where princes, ambassadors and millionaires play their parts against a background of luxury surroundings; whereas plain murder and crime investigation carried out mainly in the East End of London fail to accelerate my pulse by a single beat.

I should also mention that wonderful woman, Baroness Orzcy, and the late Sir Anthony Hope, since each produced a tale that I would have given my right hand to have written—the one the *Scarlet Pimpernel* and the other the *Prisoner of Zenda*. Re-read after a period of years these books are found to be very short, and may appear light in content. Yet each contains a central idea which was new when it first appeared. What thousands of others must have appeared since based on those remarkable originals. Both the words 'Pimpernel' and 'Ruritania' have passed into the English language, and to achieve that crowns both authors with genuine immortality.

Henty and Guy Boothby I read when I was very young, but they were never more than prep. school reading. Scott bored me to tears, and in my personal view was a pathetic figure as an historical novelist compared with Harrison Ainsworth or Stanley Weyman. Conan Doyle and Rider Haggard were both good story-tellers, although I doubt if I derived much from either. William Le Queux did nothing that Oppenheim could not have done better.

The works of a hundred other authors doubtless contributed something to my writing, but there is one more that deserves special

mention. I have always thought that the American, Louis Joseph Vance, wrote magnificent adventure stories. Sad to relate, he died in circumstances which rivalled any mystery that he ever penned. He was found one morning with his arms bound behind his back and face downwards in the then cold fire of his own sitting-room with his face charred away. So far as I know the mystery of his terrible death still remains unsolved.

Perhaps the greatest of his characters was an Irish adventurer called Terrence O'Rorke, and I recommend to anyone who can get them two books in which Terrence was the central character, called *The Pool of Flame* and *The Emperor of the Sahara*.

In any case, I must have still been very much under Louis Joseph Vance's influence when I wrote the present tale, since its hero is a pale imitation of Terrence O'Rorke.

THESE WOMEN

"I'm tellin' ye, Mr. Macgregor, niver thrust a woman—ye'll rue it if ye do." The lean, long-limbed Irishman thumped the proprietor's desk in the little hotel in Oran.

"Ah nevair do," said Mr. Macgregor.

"But returnin' now to more profitable subjects," the Irishman went on, "'tis the last dozen cases av this foine whiskey that I'm offerin' yer, an' a bargain it is at the proice. I couldn't do it at all if it weren't the last av the consignment I took fer the thrip."

Mr. Macgregor knew Ruin O'Flaherty far too well to be taken in by his ready tongue. Hadn't the Irishman been trading in Northern Africa these fifteen years, making his way from port to port, and often far into the interior—a freelance of commerce hawking safety razor-blades, tin kettles, bead necklaces, and top-hats, not to mention a thousand other likely and unlikely wares. Now it was a new brand of whiskey he was peddling—at least so the gaudy label on the bottle declared in flamboyant characters to a trusting world.

The Scotsman was not of the trusting kind, his wrinkled face shewed only doubt and disbelief.

"Faith now, take just tin cases and I'll increase the discount to sevin per cent," O'Flaherty went on persuasively. "There's not another man east of Gib. to whom I'd be making this same advantageous offer!"

Macgregor shook his sandy head; the price was getting attractive, but he hoped, by seeming uninterested, to lower it still further.

"'Tis a great concession now that I'm offerin' yer, an' 'tis only out av consideration that bein' a Scotsman ye'll dhrink most av it yerself."

"That I'll not," said Macgregor, stung into speech. "It's whiskey I drink—and a wee bairn could see that it's poison ye're selling by the label."

The Irishman closed one bright blue eye. "An' phwat'll be stoppin' "

ye pourin' the same into the empty bottles o' Buchanan and J. Walker, now—ye ould divil?"

A smile lit the face of the dry old Scot. There was silence—broken only by the buzzing of the weary flies dancing a perpetual jig in the little office. The sultry heat of the late afternoon pervaded the place, and both men were tired of haggling. "If ye give me the seven per cent. on sax cases, I'll take 'em," he said at last.

The Irishman laughed and drew a notebook from his pocket. "I'll book 'em," he said, "though 'tis meself that's the loser, and I'll stay the night in this miserable dwelling av yers that ye have the impertinence to call an hotel—free of charge—to be evin with ye!"

Macgregor solemnly poured two tots of whiskey from the sample to seal the bargain; he pushed the water bottle towards O'Flaherty. "What sort of a trip did ye have this time?" he enquired.

"Foine—'twas down the Waddy Soura to Tamtert and Ksabi that I wint. Three months av it I had, and back yisterday to Sidi-bel-Abbes with three hundred and fifty good English pounds in me pocket—all out av those black heathin divils."

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Wayland?" asked Macgregor, looking over the Irishman's shoulder.

O'Flaherty turned to see a girl standing hesitant on the other side of the wire fly-door that led to the small lounge.

The door swung open noiselessly as she gave it a slight push. "I'm looking for my husband, Mr. Macgregor," she said. "Have you seen him?"

"No, Mrs. Wayland, I have not," replied the hotel proprietor promptly. "Ye'll verra likely find him in the bar, I'm thinking."

"He's not there," she answered quickly, "I've looked. He went out at eleven this morning, and it's nearly four now—I can't think where he is; he said he'd be back for lunch."

She could not have been much more than twenty, but there were already little tell-tale lines about the corners of her mouth, and under her large eyes there were violet shadows. She was obviously unhappy and ill at ease, but very pretty in her muslin frock and big hat as she stood framed in the doorway.

The Irishman had been studying her closely. "Faith, 'tis in distress she is, the poor child," he was saying to himself. "Ruin, me bhoy, 'tis up to you entoirely," and suiting the action to the thought he bowed to her.

"Madam, if ye'll be pardoning the impertinence, can I be av any assistance to ye now—'tis Ruin O'Flaherty that I'm called, after me ould grandfather."

She looked at him gravely for a moment. "No," she said, "I don't think so, Mr. O'Flaherty, thank you all the same. I expect he will turn up." With a faint smile she went back into the lounge.

O'Flaherty shook his head. "Sure, 'tis a sweet soul she is, and a brute is that husband av hers to leave her so lonesome the livelong day."

He finished his drink, and with a nod to Macgregor went out into the street. He made a few more calls and disposed of a further fifteen

cases of his whiskey before dinner, which he took in a modest semi-European restaurant.

When he had finished he strolled about the streets enjoying the cool of the evening after a day of scorching heat. Turbanned merchants and white-robed Bedouins, Spahis, and Turcos mingled in the crowd. They were no new sight to Ruin O'Flaherty; he had lived among them for many years, and spoke their language fluently.

After a while he left the boulevards for the Arab quarter, where few Europeans were to be seen. It always amused him to watch these slow-moving, dignified people, who sat solemnly drinking in groups in front of the cafés or cross-legged in the roadway listening intently to a story-teller. For a little time he stood near one himself. The orator was telling of the days when the Arabs had been a great people, ruling by the favour of Allah from Constantinople to Khartum, and from Eastern Persia to the North of Spain.

Then he seated himself at a marble-topped table outside an Arab restaurant and ordered coffee—the thick, black, highly-sugared beverage that he had grown to love.

Mysterious veiled women flitted past him and burly negroes wearing the fez set jauntily on the back of their crisp curls. Lean pariah dogs prowled by, nosing amongst the heaps of refuse in the gutters, searching for offal. Somewhere not far away a woman was strumming on a guitar, and the sound of her mournful, plaintive song floated down from the roof of the flat-topped house where she sat. In the dark slit above the narrow alley which was the street the heavens were a pall of velvet blackness lit by innumerable stars.

The face of the girl came back to O'Flaherty. He wondered if she had found her truant husband yet. She called up old memories to his mind; perhaps the resemblance was only fancied—time had dulled the image of that other girl for whose sake he had left Ireland to make his fortune. He had loved her to distraction, but fortune had been long in coming. Three years later he had learnt that she was married to a wealthy horse-dealer in Dublin.

"'Tis a fool ye are, Ruin, me bhoy," he admonished himself, "gettin' all sentimental like a young gossoon." He paid his reckoning and made his way slowly back to the hotel.

On the verandah near the door he found her sitting—a pathetic little figure muffled in a cloak. It was growing chilly—the nights in Algeria are cold; he hesitated on the step and then turned to her.

"I'm trustin' ye're husband's come back, Mrs. Weyland?" he said quietly.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. O'Flaherty," she spoke rather gladly. "No, I'm still waiting for him."

"Ah, 'tis a shame now," he exclaimed, sitting down beside her, "an' phwat'll he be doin' all this toime away?"

"I can't think," she replied a little tearfully. "I'm afraid he must have met with an accident."

"Have ye enquired at the hospital?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Macgregor sent down for me, but Jim was not there."

The crowd in the street had thinned—it was growing late, and one by one they were seeking their dwellings.

"I'd be makin' some enquiries for ye meself," he volunteered, "but shure at this hour the bazaars'll all be empty, and the people I know sleeping in their beds—there's little we can do but wait, I'm afeerd."

Her fleeting smile of thanks was only vaguely discernible in the shadows, and for a little while they sat in silence. The musical cry of a muzzelin from the minaret of a nearby mosque calling the true believers to prayer and meditation broke the stillness. It announced the hour of midnight.

A black Biskari boy clad in worn but once gorgeous garments approached them in the darkness; he was the hall porter of the hotel.

"You come in now, yes? Me going close up hotel."

They rose in silence and went inside.

"Ye'll be goin' to bed now, Mrs. Wayland, and not worryin' over that husband o' yours?" The big Irishman bent over the girl.

"I'm afraid I couldn't sleep," she replied. "I'd rather sit up for a little while."

"Faith now," he insisted, "it's yer bright eyes ye'll be after spoilin' by losin' yer sleep; 'twill do ye a power o' good to be restin'."

She shook her head as she sat down in the lounge. "Please don't worry about me—I'd rather wait up."

He was so sorry for her that he did not like to leave her there alone, and sitting down beside her endeavoured to make the time pass more quickly by his chatter.

At first she said little as he talked of his nomad existence, but presently she began to talk about herself. She said that she had been on the stage; her parents were dead, she had little money, and no influence; she had soon discovered that she had little talent as well. No other opening offered, however, so she had had to stick to it. After a couple of dreary years in the provinces she had accepted an offer to come out to Cairo for a season because the pay was high. There she had met Jim Wayland. That had been a little over three months ago.

It did not take much imagination on O'Flaherty's part to guess that she had jumped at the chance of leaving the theatre. He quite realized the sort of hell it must be for any girl decently brought up to live with the touring companies out from home. He wondered what Wayland was like.

They talked on, growing strangely intimate in the silent hours, despite their short acquaintance. The missing husband did not return, and the fumed oak clock ticked steadily on towards morning.

"Don't you ever want to go home?" she asked him once.

"Phwat would be the use av it at all?" he shrugged. "Time was when I would have been glad enough to be in the ould country, but thin I was poor. Now that I've a decent bit put away and there's no need for me to go trapesing round the world, I kape on from the habit. Sure, I've neither kith nor kin av me own to return to—and home's a poor place without friends."

"Why don't you marry?" she suggested.

"Ah, come, now," he laughed, "an' who'd be marryin' the loikes av meself?"

"I should think a lot of nice girls would be pleased to," she answered seriously. "You're so kind you'd make any woman a good husband."

He noted the shade of bitterness in her voice, and wondered once more what Wayland could be like. He questioned her again as to her husband's possible whereabouts.

It seemed that they had only been in Oran the last two days. Her husband had mentioned a man named Barry whom he had gone out to see that morning; she did not know his address. He had also spoken of a Frenchman called Ribereau, who kept a café in the Rue de Lourdes—she herself knew no one in Oran.

They sat on side by side as the hours dragged slowly by; once or twice she suggested that he should leave her, but she did not show any intention of going to bed herself, and he would not desert her. Not until the faint grey light of dawn came through the wire blinds did either of them realize how long they had been sitting there.

The Irishman rose and stretched his cramped limbs. "Faith," he ejaculated, "d'ye know 'tis close on foive av the clock, Mrs. Wayland?"

She stood up quickly. "Is it, really—and I've kept you up all night. I'm so sorry."

"Now, 'tis foolishness to say that, an' ye know ut; sure, it's been a rale pleasure to talk to ye this night, an' it's loike ould times to hear the sound av a decent woman's voice."

"It's very nice of you to say that," she smiled, "but now I insist on your going to bed."

"I'm doin' no sich thing, Mrs. Wayland"; he laid a hand on her arm. "'Tis meself that's the man av the party, an' it's yerself that's goin' to yer bed this minute, while I step out and look around for that husband av yours."

She made no more than a show of protesting, and he led her to the foot of the staircase. "Be off with ye now," he said kindly, "and I'll bring him back to ye, as sure as me name's O'Flaherty, I will."

He paused to nod farewell to her as she turned on the landing; then, unlocking the door, let himself out into the street. The sun had already leapt above the horizon, heralding another day of blazing heat.

As he walked the deserted ways shapeless bundles of rags in arched doorways rose shivering and stretched themselves into the semblance of humanity. Lean beggars with unsightly sores and shrivelled limbs, toothless old hags, the scum of Oran, sunk so low that they had not even the corner of a hovel which they might call their own. Beggars leading a precarious existence, living from day to day on the alms they gathered from the pious Mussulman who gave charity for the love of Allah

O'Flaherty went straight to the café in the Rue de Lourdes; that was the only line of enquiry he had to go on. A slatternly negress and a tousled waiter were making a pretence of cleaning the place when he arrived; Monsieur Ribereau, he learned, was upstairs asleep in bed.

After judicious tipping the waiter agreed to go up and wake him. O'Flaherty sat down to wait. The Frenchman arrived; a fat man in a gaudy dressing-gown with round, surprised dark eyes.

Yes, he knew Monsieur Wayland. The previous evening he had taken an *apéritif* with Monsieur Barry; he had not seen either of them since.

O'Flaherty thanked him, and got the address of Barry's office; it seemed that his house was some way outside the town. Then the Irishman took his departure.

He found Barry's office easily enough, but it was not yet open, so he went to a nearby café and made an early breakfast, then he returned. Barry had not yet arrived, but a young Frenchman was in charge; it appeared that Barry was a shipping agent. O'Flaherty sat down to wait.

A little after nine a car drew up and a thin man with a sallow, parchment-like complexion got out; he was followed by a big, rather fresh-faced fellow with blue eyes and curly hair. The first proved to be Barry, and immediately O'Flaherty spoke to him the second man came forward.

"I'm Wayland," he said, "what's the trouble?"

"No trouble at all," declared O'Flaherty angrily, "but what ye've made fer ye poor wife. It's a disgrace ye are, leaving her all night the way ye have, and herself not knowing phwat had become of ye."

"Steady on," said the fair man, "didn't she get my message?"

"Sure she did not, an' it's worryin' her heart out she's been."

"I say," exclaimed Wayland. "Poor kid—I had a terrific lot of business to attend to last night with Barry, here; we had to see another man as well, so I arranged to stay over at his place for the night." He turned suddenly on his friend. "What the devil happened to that boy of yours, Barry? Why didn't he deliver my note?"

Barry shrugged his slim shoulders. "Sorry, Wayland, he's reliable enough as a rule, but you know what these people are if they get a fit all of a sudden to go on a bust or something."

"I'll get back to the hotel at once," said Wayland, with a worried look; "she must have been scared out of her wits. I'll talk to that boy of yours with the end of a stick when I see him." He looked at O'Flaherty. "Very good of you to come along—if you're going back, we'll go together."

It was a perfectly reasonable explanation, and the Irishman, his temper slightly mollified, fell into step beside Wayland.

At the hotel the latter left him and went straight up to his wife's room. O'Flaherty had a word with Macgregor, and sought his bed for a few hours' belated sleep.

When he came down the hot afternoon sunshine was streaming through the hotel windows. Mr. and Mrs. Wayland were sitting together in the lounge—she rose immediately to greet him.

"Oh, Mr. O'Flaherty," she smiled, "we've been hoping to see you again; if you're not fixed up we'd be so pleased if you'd dine with us to-night."

He smiled all over his good-natured face. "Now, that's charming

av ye, Mrs. Wayland. It had been my intention to take the boat over to Cartagena to-day, but sure it's too late by the look av the clock."

"I'm afraid it's through me that you've missed it," put in Wayland. "All the more reason you should let us stand you a dinner, at least. I'll get Barry and Ribereau to come along, and we'll make it a bit of a party—what about a drink?"

"Well, and why not, to be sure; it's meself that'll be glad to hear the tinkle av ice in a horse's neck." O'Flaherty drew a chair up to their table.

He reckoned Wayland to be about forty, a decent enough fellow in his way, but too fat for his age; his fresh-coloured face was not altogether healthy. O'Flaherty did not think him half good enough for the girl.

She did not seem quite at her ease, but that, he thought, might be because they had had a row about the night before.

It was agreed that they should dine at Ribereau's place; he would let them have his private room. Barry was telephoned to, and accepted. They met at the café in the Rue de Lourdes at a little before eight.

O'Flaherty always enjoyed a junketing, and over dinner he let himself go. The eyes of the girl were on him, and half unconsciously, because of their gaze, he became gayer and more entertaining. He chaffed her about her solemnity, and she obviously did her best to play up to him, but for some reason she seemed unable to throw off the nervousness and constraint she had shown in the afternoon.

It was Barry who suggested a game of poker when the meal was over. O'Flaherty agreed readily enough; he was fond of the game and flattered himself that he was a pretty strong player—good enough to hold his own with most people if the luck of the cards was not against him. Mrs. Wayland stood up. "Don't let's play to-night," she said, "I'm tired."

Wayland's blue eyes showed wide surprise. "Well——" he said. "I've never known you refuse to play before—still, you stand out, if you like. It's only a baby game we play, Mr. O'Flaherty," he added to his guest.

The Frenchman had already fetched the chips, and was counting them out in piles on the table. It was like a thousand other games of poker that have been played in every corner of the world before—the stakes were moderate enough when the game began, and the luck seemed fairly even. As the evening wore on the limits were increased. O'Flaherty held good hands, but the luck began to run strongly against him. Mrs. Wayland sat smoking, or stood behind one or other of the men, watching the play.

Just before midnight O'Flaherty won a handsome Jackpot on four kings. For some moments the girl had been sitting quietly on the sofa. Out of the corner of his eye he caught an angry glance from Wayland in her direction. She stood up as the next hand was dealt and walked round the table, pausing behind the Irishman's chair. His hand was a good one, but he went down heavily; he felt a little sick as realization suddenly came to him, and laid down his cards.

The whole thing was a put-up job, and he'd tumbled into it like an unlicked cub. The girl was tipping off her husband and the others when to chuck in or when to raise him according to the cards he held—they were nothing but a bunch of crooks practising the oldest and simplest form of card-sharping in the universe.

He looked at the faces of the three men again, and the scales dropped from his eyes. The fat Frenchman was a crook, if ever there was one, in spite of his wide eyes. Barry's lean, wrinkled face was as hard as nails, the glib Wayland's weak blue eyes wavered and fell under his steady glance.

His thoughts leapt back to the day before—the girl was a decoy. She must have overheard him in the office telling old Macgregor that he'd made a pile on his trip. Then when he'd gone out she'd tipped off her husband to stay the night with his friend, and sat there on the doorstep waiting to make a fool of him.

For a moment Ruin O'Flaherty saw red—he had a good mind to break up the place—then he thought better of it. There were three of them, and although he was useful in a scrap they would probably call up the waiters from below. The Rue de Lourdes was in none too savoury a district. Better cut his losses and get out.

With a nasty shock he realized that he had been fleeced of two hundred and sixty pounds, his earnings on nine weeks' hard, anxious work under the blistering sun of Northern Africa, and not a hope of getting it back in this den of thieves. He rose to his feet abruptly.

"That'll be all fer to-night," he said sharply, and he moved towards the door. "Sure, it's a great husband ye've got, Mrs. Wayland, and foine friends, but if they get losht, I'll be thinking ye can take care av yerself."

There was a hard light in his eyes, and none of them attempted to stop him. Only Wayland called after him when he was safely through the door in a mocking parody of his Irish brogue: "'Tis a foine Knight Errant ye make, Mr. O'Flaherty!"

With fury in his heart Ruin walked back to the hotel; he was more angry with himself than with the gang of swindlers. It rankled badly that at his age he had been taken in by that little slut of a girl.

Although it was past twelve, Macgregor was still up. O'Flaherty joined him in his office. "Will ye be givin' me a drink now?" he demanded angrily.

Macgregor carefully measured out a tot. With his shrewd eyes he regarded the Irishman curiously.

"I'm tellin' ye, Mister Macgregor," said O'Flaherty, as he picked up the glass, "niver thrust a woman—ye'll rue it if ye do."

"Ah nevair do," said Mr. Macgregor.

How the fire started no one ever knew. Ruin O'Flaherty was a light sleeper, and was awakened by the first shouting. He was out of bed in a minute to see what the row was about, and pushed his tousled head into the corridor.

He smelt smoke and did not wait for further information. Quickly and calmly he pulled on his clothes, threw his belongings into a battered suitcase, and ran down into the street.

A crowd had gathered: some in nightshirts, some the slinking beggars from the nearby streets. Smoke was pouring from the second-floor windows. Macgregor was in the hall giving orders to the servants.

O'Flaherty grabbed a negro who was making off with a china vase, and after that devoted his efforts to preventing the riff-raff from looting other portions of Macgregor's property. Suddenly he ran into Wayland.

"An' phwat'll ye be doin' here?" he exclaimed. "Is it that ye've had the impertinence to come back and spend the night in a decent man's hotel?"

"Why not?" asked Wayland sulkily. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Faith no, ye dirty swindler," cried O'Flaherty sarcastically, "an' wher have ye left that lying wife o' yours this toime?"

"Don't know." Wayland looked away uneasily. "She'll be down in a minute, I suppose."

"Phwat's that ye say?" yelled the Irishman, seizing the card-sharper by the collar of his dressing-gown. "Is it to burn that ye've left her, d'ye mean?"

Wayland cowered away. "We had a row when we got back last night," he muttered. "She wouldn't sleep with me—took a room for herself on the third floor—and anyhow she's not my wife."

"So 'tis a coward ye are as well as a thief—ye lousy loon." With a mighty shove O'Flaherty sent the fair man sprawling in the gutter. He dashed into the hotel and took the stairs three at a time. On the second floor black smoke was billowing from the far end of the passage. He choked and coughed as the acrid fumes caught him in the throat. The crackling of the flames could be heard distinctly from the landing. He rushed up the remaining flight.

He tried three rooms without success, and then he found her; she had slept peacefully through it all. He paused for a moment, looking down on her; she was looking very lovely with one arm thrown back in a graceful curve above her head, her fair curls framing her face, then he woke her.

She sat up with a start, and in a few words he told her of the danger and helped her to cram a few things into a bag. She pulled a cloak round her and went out with him into the passage.

The smoke was eddying up the staircase, but when they reached the second floor they found Macgregor. He had organized the servants into a living chain, passing water buckets from hand to hand. There was little real danger, and O'Flaherty got the girl into the street without difficulty.

As they stood together on the steps of the hotel she looked at him with troubled eyes and then quickly away. "I—I might have been trapped," she said at last. "Fancy it being you who saved me."

"'Tis nothin'," he shrugged. "'Twas a human life, fer all ye're a crook."

"I am," she admitted. "Last night wasn't the first time; I've been at it for months—I'm as bad as the rest."

He gave her a hard stare. "Thin let this be a warnin' to ye. Be done with it now, and go straight for a change."

"I can't," she said bitterly. "I've got no money; if I had I'd go home and try to get a job."

"No money, is it?" he laughed. "An' phwat av the two hundred and sixty good pounds ye took off the poor fool that's meself this night?"

She opened her bag and produced a roll of notes. "I can't keep that," she said gently, "not after what's happened. It's lucky they don't trust each other and make me keep the cash. I've another three hundred here—we don't share out till the end of the month."

He took the notes and stuffed them in his pocket. "That's dacent av ye," he grinned. "Sure, an' I niver thought to see that good money again; but let us be after hearin' now—what's to be preventing av ye sailing away to ould England at the ind av the month?"

She smiled ruefully at him. "They wouldn't let me; besides, I don't get a share of the money—only decent clothes and my keep." She sighed. "It's a rotten life, but it's better than Cairo—that was true, all that I told you about being on the stage."

He nodded. "An' has it niver entered ye're pretty head to shlip off one foine day with all that money av theirs?"

She looked at him wide-eyed for a moment. "But I couldn't—it isn't mine."

Ruin O'Flaherty threw back his head and his laughter filled the little street. "Be jabbers," he cried, when he had recovered, "'tis foolish ye are, but as honest as meself!"

The fire had been put out; people were filing back into the hotel. O'Flaherty looked into the girl's eyes long and seriously; then he said slowly, "'Tis sick av this roamin' life I am, an' 'tis the ould country I'd like to be seein' once more—have ye ever been in Dublin town?"

"No——" she said, with a little choke in her voice. "No—you don't mean," a sudden hope lit her pale face, "you'd take me with you?"

He picked up her bag and his own. "Come on, now," he said, "we'll be movin' to a hotel down the street, or it's murtherin' that Wayland man I'll be—'twas yerself that was tellin' me what a foine husband I'd make."

Half an hour later Wayland came down from his room to Macgregor's bar. Quite a number of people were still up having drinks and discussing the fire. He had seen O'Flaherty go off with the girl, but he had not the courage to follow. He knew that their plunder had gone, too. Morosely he lounged up to the bar and ordered himself a drink. Macgregor set it before him. His angry blue eyes scowled into Macgregor's as he snarled: "That blasted girl of mine has gone off with your Irish friend, and taken most of my cash. I'll tell you something, Macgregor—never trust a woman—you'll rue it if you do."

"Ah nevair do," said Mr. Macgregor.

STORY XIV

HERE IS SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT—A STORY FOR THE TALKING Screen. As such it is naturally presented in episodic form, but it is none the less a good plot for that, and its setting having a Balkan flavour gives it some claim to inclusion between the covers of this book.

People are always asking me why so few of my full-length novels have been filmed, and I think the answer is, just because they are full-length novels. Books with so many characters and the great variety of scenes necessitated by a constantly moving plot would, if followed faithfully, episode by episode, result in a film longer than Bernard Shaw's longest play. They can, of course, be reduced to their essential theme without losing anything of their entertainment value; but that is a major work which few people except their authors are usually willing to undertake, and, unfortunately, film magnates have a strange prejudice against letting authors adapt their own books for the film.

Generally speaking, film magnates much prefer to buy the bare bones of a plot and pay anything from six to twenty script writers, most of whom have never had a line of their own composition published in their lives, to elaborate the theme. This invariably costs the company several thousand pounds and, since each of the script writers is dependent for his next job on leaving his individual mark upon the story in hand, the final result is rarely worth one-tenth of the price that has been paid for it. It is this pernicious system of having too many cooks, all with conflicting interests, which results in the story-telling end of film production being on such an extraordinarily low level compared with the other technicalities of the industry.

Having come up against this iron ring of vested interests I thought it would be amusing to try to break into the film game from the other end—by just producing the bare bones of a scenario and, if it was accepted, let the other fellows fight over the body—and I very nearly succeeded.

One afternoon I went down to Shepherd's Bush to see my old friend Alfred Hitchcock direct the great George Arliss in a film. 'Hitch' was a most lovable personality, but Mr. Arliss, very conscious of his greatness which, as one of the most fervent of his admirers, I should be the last to deny, was by no means so forthcoming as most of the film stars I have met. Instead of taking any interest in the proceedings or mingling with the other artists on the set during those innumerable delays to which all film production is subject he spent most of the afternoon in the complete seclusion of a small four-sided garden tent which he had had specially erected at one side of the studio. Hidden from our vulgar gaze he remained resting there, while his valet brought him periodic brews of weak China tea served in his own silver service, except for brief intervals when he emerged to say a few lines of his part before the camera with extraordinary artistry.

The bare sight of him, however, was enough to give me the idea that if only I could build a little story suited to such an outstanding personality I should double my chance of having it accepted.

The story, as it appears here, went in to Gaumont British and, to my delight, Angus McPhail, the gifted chief of their story department, was openly enthusiastic about it. But so great a figure was Mr. Arliss that no story was every bought for him which had not first received his full approval. He read the script over the week-end and turned it down, his reason being, so I was told, that he felt that the love interest was too prominent and, in consequence, detracted from the central character.

If that is so perhaps the multiplicity of writers who work on the average script is not the only reason why the story-telling end of so many films is chaotic and ill proportioned. No story can be done full justice if one character in it must be given pride of place to the detriment of the others.

Naturally, at the time, I was rather disappointed, but not unduly so, as this outline of an exciting film plot had been fun to do and cost me little time or trouble. And, after all, since Mr. Arliss must be well advanced in years it may be that another actor of his parts is even now climbing towards the throne from which he has enthralled us. Should that be so and the new star chance to read this story, who knows but what it may yet reach a film public of many millions. The film rights are still for sale and, praise be to Allah, still my property.

THE TERRORIST

A

DENNIS WHEATLEY
Story for the Talking Screen

Cast

NICHOLAS THE VII, KING OF SERAVONIA	<i>George Arliss type</i>
HIS WIFE. CAROLINE, QUEEN OF SERAVONIA	<i>A Woman of fifty</i>
LEUTENANT SASHA RENESCU	<i>A Young Man</i>
(Of the Royal Guard)	
STEPHANIE	<i>A Young Girl</i>
DOCTOR PAILEV	<i>A Man of fifty</i>
THE CHIEF OF THE POLICE	
THE COLONEL OF THE GUARD	

Terrorists, Court Officials, Bohemians at the
New Art Club, Crowd, etc.

NOTE

The present manuscript is only the story in outline, since the limited experience of the author brings him to believe that opportunity

should be afforded to the actors in a screen play to build up characterization throughout the sequences rather than to produce an elaborate and involved plot which will need considerable cutting to enable the actors to display their personality. Should it be thought necessary, the provision of additional matter for the lengthening of the story is an easy matter as far as the author is concerned.

EVENING. A comfortable homely book-lined room. A man of fifty is seated working at a big desk table. He wears a velvet smoking jacket. Near him a charming white-haired woman of about the same age is lying on a sofa. Her legs are covered by a plaid rug; a woollen shawl is round her shoulders. She is busy knitting.

For a moment we watch them. He works silently and rapidly, examining papers, signing them, transferring a large pile from one basket to another. She has a streaming cold. Every time she blows her nose he looks up with mingled irritation and concern. At length he stands up from his desk and, going over to her, says with real solicitude:

"Caroline, my dear—to see you like this troubles me. You know your chest is not strong. Won't you please go to bed."

She smiles and shakes her head. "No, Nicholas. If I did, you would work here all night. Even after all these years I can't trust you. When you are ready, bed it shall be—but not before."

He sighs. "But, my love, there is always so much to do. If I leave it to others somehow it never seems to get done. What would happen to our work-people if I did not use what little influence I have to better their condition from time to time?"

"And yet you are faced with another strike."

"True. They want a forty-two-hour week now. It seems that they object to working for more than six hours a day. I wonder what they would say if they knew that I work my steady hundred hours a week and more?"

She puts up a hand and strokes his cheek. "Nobody who has ever known the real you, Nicholas, could ever help but love you. The trouble is that so few of them ever have the opportunity."

"Ah, well." He laughs quietly. "I shall continue as always to do what I can for them. But you are my first care, and if there is no other way in which I can induce you to take care of yourself, I will abandon work for to-night and we will go to bed."

He moves over to a side-table where a spirit stove, a saucepan, water, lemon, and whiskey are set; and proceeds to make her a hot grog. In light conversation it is conveyed that this is an invariable ritual when she has a cold and that he will allow nobody to make this specific for his wife but himself.

The grog is made. He presses a bell and she rises from the sofa. Carrying the grog in one hand he offers her his free arm with a courtly little bow. The camera then switches round to a portion of the room unseen before, showing it to be a bigger apartment than might have at first been supposed. Two large double doors are thrown open.

Officers and servants in brilliant uniforms are disclosed. A Colonel of the Guards comes forward and salutes. The Grand Chamberlain raps his Rod of Office on the parquet floor. A powdered footman takes the glass of grog. Then, and then only, is it disclosed that this charming homely couple are His Majesty King Nicholas VII of Seravonia and his Queen.

They are conducted through long corridors of the Palace to their apartments. Nicholas bows the Queen into her room and enters the next door along the corridor. A line of half a dozen privates of the Guard stands at attention against the wall opposite the doorways of the two bedrooms, and in front of them, with a drawn sword, a dark, handsome, merry-eyed young officer.

The King pauses for a moment and turning to the Colonel, who is behind him, remarks that he does not remember this young officer's face. The Colonel then presents the officer as Lieutenant Sasha Renescu. It is the first occasion after joining the regiment for him to be honoured with the duty of Officer of the Guard.

The King says a few kind words to him, recalling the fact that he remembers his father, Colonel Gregory Renescu, who lost his life in the first Balkan war, while bringing dispatches of the utmost value to him, then a young Prince commanding one of the Divisions of the Seravonian Army.

We next see the Queen in bed. The King comes in from the adjoining room in his dressing-gown. He sees that she finishes her hot grog, tucks her up and switches out all the lights except that on her bedside table. Then he kisses her and says: "If there is anything you want, my love, you have only to call. I shall leave my door ajar and I am quite near."

She smiles up to him. "Dear Nicholas—always quite near."

The King in his bedroom. As he gets into bed he produces, with a little smile, the big sheaf of papers which he was not able to finish in his study. He makes himself comfortable in bed and then settles down to work again.

We now see Lieutenant Sasha Renescu walking quietly down the corridor outside the Royal apartment. A private is stationed upon the King's door, another upon the Queen's. With slow steps Sasha goes to the end of the corridor and out through two wide french windows on to a terrace. At the extreme end of the terrace we see a sentry on his beat. Sasha glances the other way and another sentry is approaching from the opposite end of the terrace. The two meet just outside the King's bedroom window, which is next to the lighted one giving on to the corridor, halt, face about, and march off on their beat again.

Another shot of the King. As he deals with his papers he is placing those to which he has attended upon a bedside table. The pile on the counterpane is diminishing. He yawns, but he is still working.

Sasha again in the corridor. Once more we see him walk softly to the french windows. For a moment he leans negligently against the side of the open window and yawns: then goes out on to the terrace,

Six feet below the balustrade we see a garden; a lovely girl in evening dress is standing below. Sasha sees her, his eye brightens, he leans over the balustrade and whistles softly.

The girl looks up. She smiles a little and comes forward into the light which streams out from the corridor window behind him.

"Who are you?" he inquires, "and how did you get in?"

She replies that she lives in the Palace and is the daughter of one of the chamberlains.

She is so lovely that he is quite certain that he could never have forgotten her face if he had once seen it among those of the ladies of the Court. She reassures him by saying that she has only just returned from living, for the past year, with her aunt in England. That is why he would not have seen her before.

"What are you doing up so late?" he asks softly.

"I could not sleep," she tells him. "And at night the garden is so lovely."

They talk for a little, the usual position of such scenes being reversed in this instance. He is on the balcony and she is in the garden below.

The King is shown again, his work completed. He slips all the papers into a drawer beside the bed, gets out, tiptoes over to the communicating door which leads to his wife's room, listens for a moment, smiles to himself, then gets back into bed, and switches off the light.

The terrace again. The two sentries are at the extreme limits of their beat. Sasha glances over his shoulder down the corridor. The two other sentries are standing rigid at attention before the doors of the Royal apartments. With a little laugh he flings his leg over the balustrade and slips down into the garden beside the girl. They begin to walk up and down beneath the terrace. He glances up from time to time keeping a watchful eye upon the two sentries who pace backwards and forwards to meet every few minutes and turn about before the King's window. We then see him whisper something into the girl's ear. She gives a low delicious gurgle of laughter and presses his arm.

The scene moves to some high bushes. Behind these are four men in dark clothes. Of the two foremost, one is a tall, powerfully-built middle-aged man. He is bare-headed and has an exceptionally high bald forehead, wisps of grey straggling hair fall from the back and sides of his head on to his collar. The other is a young man dressed in ragged clothes, his face has the semi-imbecile look of a cretin or one who has been drugged. His eyes are round and staring. In his hand he holds a big automatic. He stands quite rigid and motionless as the elder man points through the bushes to the balcony and whispers in his ear. The two other men stand alert and watchful behind them.

As the elderly man points through the bushes to the balcony, we see Sasha and the girl walking up and down beneath it. The distance of their beat has considerably increased. They come towards the bushes where the four men are crouching and pass them. Suddenly

the two rear men of the group spring out and strike Sasha down from behind with bludgeons. The girl runs off into the gardens. The elderly man points again excitedly at the balcony. The two sentries are now at the extremities of their beat. The young drugged-looking man rushes forward, his eyes fixed and unblinking as though he were in a hypnotic trance. He scrambles up over the low balustrade on to the terrace and hurls himself in through the darkened window of the King's bedroom.

The King's bedroom. 'Shot' from behind his bed. The windows come crashing open. We see the blinding flash of shots as the assassin fires towards the bed. In those brief spurts of light we catch a glimpse of the King's face as he starts up awake and flings himself off the bed on to the floor at its far side from the window.

The door bursts open. The sentry from the corridor comes rushing in. The two sentries on the balcony appear in the window and seize the assassin. The lights go on. The Queen is standing in the doorway. The King hurries over to her. She sways into his arms and almost faints. We see the would-be assassin dumb, animal-eyed, passive, apparently almost unconscious of his surroundings, being hustled away by the guards.

The Queen's bedroom. She is again in bed. The King bends over her solicitously.

"There, there, my love," he comforts her.

"But, Nicholas . . ." her distress is pathetic. "One day they will get you, and then the whole world will go dark for me."

He laughs a little. "No, no, you must not distress yourself. It is just part of my business to be shot at occasionally, just as a sea captain must risk the storm which sinks his ship or a miner take the chance that one day he will be entombed by an explosion. These mixed races in our country—one does what one can—but it is impossible to please them all."

"But, Nicholas, I'm terrified for you, This is the second attempt in six months."

He shakes his head. "You need have no real fear for me, Caroline. These Terrorists are cowards. The leaders would not dare to take a chance themselves. They fasten upon some poor disappointed student who has failed to pass his exams and thinks that he has some grievance. They then drug him with hashish until he does not know what he is about. This poor fellow to-night was half-stupid with the drug, and it is always so. That is why they so rarely hit their mark even at close range. Why, if you threw your knitting needle at a man a dozen feet away you could not fail to hit him. But they always miss. Nothing but an accident, my dear, will make you free to marry that handsome Grand Chamberlain of mine, I promise you."

"Oh, Nicholas, how can you?"

"I mean it, Caroline. That is why, when the Purity League sent the new petition to the Chamber that I should tighten up the laws about the smuggling of drugs I postponed the issue for the fourteenth time. I could hardly say that to do so would not be healthy for myself."

"Nicholas, be serious."

"I am, my dear. I believe in drugs in moderation, and for that reason I am now going to give you just half a grain of medinal to make you sleep."

He takes a bottle of tablets from the cupboard, pours out a glass of water, and we then fade out, too.

The corridor. Lieutenant Sasha Renescu stands half-dazed against the wall, his hair is dishevelled, a little rivulet of blood runs down his cheek. Opposite to him is his Colonel, livid with rage. The Colonel tears off the young officer's single decoration and flings it on the floor. He then tears off his epaulettes and, snatching his sword out of its scabbard, breaks it across his knee. As he does so, the King, in his dressing-gown, comes out from the Queen's door into the corridor and with a shrewd eye takes in the scene.

The two officers spring to attention. The King beckons the young Lieutenant into his bedroom. The Colonel remains in the corridor, mute and furious.

The King is seated on the edge of his bed. Sasha stands at attention before him.

"You know, my boy, that this will mean court martial and the loss of your commission," the King says kindly. "For the protection of the State we cannot afford to allow such culpable negligence upon the part of an Officer of the Guard to be overlooked. By your own confession you were talking to some young woman in the garden, it seems, when you should have been watching while I slept."

Sasha murmurs an assent, and the King then goes on to say that in view of the service rendered by the boy's father he does not wish to be unduly harsh. If Sasha wishes, although he may no longer serve him as an officer, he may serve him privately and thus, after a period, earn reinstatement to his rank. Sasha, overcome with repentance at his folly, springs at the chance.

The King then tells him that, although he does not fear assassination for himself, he does fear death at the hands of the Terrorists on account of the nation. His premature death would destroy all the good work which he is trying to do, and one day, even if it is by a stray bullet, he feels certain that they will get him if they are not suppressed. He has his secret police, but the trouble is that the Terrorist organization knows them just as the cleverest criminals in Europe know the leading detectives among the police, so their sphere of activity is limited. Here is an opportunity to try to find out who the leaders are from a completely different angle. A young officer who has been cashiered at the beginning of his career for something which he might well feel to be only a slight negligence. It should be readily accepted by them that he has reason for a grievance and that his misfortune may have slightly turned his brain. Is Sasha prepared, therefore, to serve his King by endeavouring to get accepted by these people as one of themselves, find out who the real leaders are and enable the Government to crush the mainspring of the organization once and for all?

Sasha accepts the dangerous mission. He is only too willing to do anything to repair the blunder that he has made.

The King then tells Sasha that should he succeed in obtaining any useful information he is not to communicate with the police but write to Hans Kartoff, whose private address is No. 7, Tiergarten Gasser. Hans Kartoff is the King's personal valet and will pass the information direct to him immediately.

Sasha repeats the address. The King leads him to the door and opening it says coldly to the Colonel:

"It is our desire that this officer shall be placed under close arrest and, after the due formalities have been observed, it is quite obvious that we shall no longer require his services."

The guards close in on either side of Sasha and he is marched away.

We next see Sasha in civil clothes at what has obviously been a smart and comfortable flat. The walls, however, have been stripped of their pictures, a number of packing-cases stand about the floor, and it is obvious that he is selling up and going away.

The next shot is of him leaving the building, the packing-cases are being piled into a van, and he enters a taxi-cab with a single battered suitcase.

We then see him in a dingy room in the lower part of the city. He is bargaining with an old hag of a landlady for this new accommodation.

Next, loafing along a mean street and entering a working man's café. That he has grown a small pointed beard shows us that a period of time has elapsed.

In the café there is loud talk against the Government. We see a workman with a morning paper spit upon a portrait of the King in his full-dress uniform at some function. Sasha gets into conversation with the workman. We hear the New Art Club mentioned.

We then dissolve into the Club. The occupants are Bohemians. The women, mostly art model type, except for one or two elderly ones who have a very male appearance. The men vary from lusty, tough-looking artisans to bespectacled big-headed types of the middle classes. One or two are even in dinner-jackets. Sasha is seated at a table alone.

After a little, the girl who was in the Palace garden enters. Sasha recognizes her at once, but she does not notice him, and takes a near-by table. With her is an effeminate young man in a dinner-jacket. He is a little drunk and talking loudly in a high-pitched voice. She tries to quieten him.

Suddenly the girl looks across at Sasha. A faint gleam of puzzled recognition dawns in her eyes. He nods and moves over to her table. The young man begins a drunken protest. She ignores him and, with an angry shrug, he leaves the table to join another woman who is seated alone.

Sasha talks to the girl and finds out that her name is Stephanie. He pretends to be angry with her as a cause of his downfall, but he is much more angry with the King and his Colonel for refusing to overlook his slight breach of duty in leaving his post.

He accuses her then of being mixed up with the Terrorists. Why otherwise should she be in a place like this? Her story of being an inmate of the Palace and daughter of one of the chamberlains was obviously a lie. As he talks he simulates gradually increasing anger until, in a burst of apparent fury, he threatens to denounce her to the police.

His policy is effective, she becomes alarmed, her eyes grow wide and frightened. She feels that she must do something to prevent him carrying out his threat, so she takes the line of throwing herself on his mercy.

She confesses that she is a member of the Terrorist organization. Her father was not a chamberlain, but a brilliant barrister, and Member of the Chamber of Deputies. He was arrested on account of his liberal ideas and then released. Three days later the late King was assassinated. Her father happened to be in the crowd nearby at the time. He was absolutely innocent, but one of the secret police happened to recognize him and hauled him off after the *mêlée*. He was tried *in camera* and shot as an accessory even though innocent. Ever since she has worked for revenge upon this brutal Government as the corner-stone of which stands the present King. She associated more and more with her dead father's political friends, and through them gradually got to know the most discontented elements in the population, and eventually became a member of the secret society which believed that the removal of this semi-autocratic monarch would be the salvation of the country.

Sasha now becomes sympathetic. He airs his own grievance about his abrupt dismissal, and there is no more talk of his having her arrested. They agree to meet in the park on the following afternoon.

We now see the middle-aged, strong-faced, semi-bald man who was behind the bushes in the Palace gardens. He is in the white coat of a doctor. It is a slum practice. Outside his door there is a long queue of poor, miserable, patient people waiting to see him. He deals with them one by one, being wonderfully kind and tender with the children. In an interval between his seeing patients Stephanie enters through a sliding panel in his consulting-room.

"What is it?" he asks, impatient apparently at being interrupted in his work.

"A new recruit I think," she says. "May I bring him to you? I believe that he will prove the perfect instrument. He knows the Palace routine and has a grudge. He has all the makings of a fanatic, and will do our work for us if only you can arrange some way in which to treat him with the drug."

Doctor Pailev consents. "Bring him to-night," he says abruptly, and Stephanie disappears through the panel.

The park that afternoon. Sasha meets Stephanie. He is clean-shaven again now. She asks him why. He says that it is because he has new hope. Before he felt that life was finished for him. Now he knows that there is work for him to do. Something worth while. The overthrow of a corrupt Government by steady work against it

and eventually the freeing of his countrymen from an intolerable autocracy.

Sasha and Stephanie then go out on the ornamental lake in a little boat. There is a pretty scene where the young man breaks for a moment from the part he is playing and becomes the potential lover. Stephanie, too, casts aside her earnestness for a little, but just as she is softening to the normal feeling of a woman of her years for a young and attractive man, she draws back. They must not talk of such things as love. They have work to do—urgent important work—upon their strength of will and that of other comrades who feel the same depends the salvation of the country.

The New Arts Club again. Doctor Pailev has just arrived. He is talking to Stephanie inside the doorway and says: "I thought it would be better if I met him here for the first time, just casually. If, after I have had an opportunity to judge, I think you right, you can both come back with me."

Sasha enters at this moment and is introduced. All three sit down at one of the tables and drinks are brought. Doctor Pailev appears to be a benign kindly person who talks of the good work he is doing to relieve pain and suffering in the slums, but occasionally we catch the gleam of the fanatic in his eyes. Then the talk turns to politics.

"Not here, my friend," says the good Doctor. "It is too public. But come home with me for a night-cap before you go to bed."

We then see the Doctor's surgery again and through a doorway a sitting-room furnished with rather shabby comfort. The three are together there. Sasha, apparently angry and indignant, is telling again the story of his dismissal, but the Doctor soothes him down.

"We must be patient, friend," he tells him. "Patient—a word here and a word there. Help with processions and petitions where we can; make converts of our friends wherever possible, and the laws will be altered in good time. You must not take any notice of Stephanie. She is embittered by her poor father's death and something of a firebrand. She even mixes with rather dangerous people, and I have warned her about that. For no good can come of it to herself or to the country."

Sasha protests that they may wait until they are grey, but the laws will not be altered. Stephanie is right, and some action should be taken at least to force the King's abdication.

The Doctor is all against any form of direct action however. Then he remarks how tired Sasha is looking. He must allow him to prescribe for him.

Sasha admits that he is not sleeping well, so the Doctor mixes him a draught and then, unlocking a drawer, takes a little phial of pills from it which he gives him saying: "You must take three of these a day. "It is only a mild tonic, but it will buck you up."

The park again. Sasha and Stephanie are sitting on the grass having a picnic lunch together. He is looking tired and worried. The muscles of his face twitch occasionally. He complains that for the last fortnight he has been feeling rotten. The Doctor's pills

seemed to buck him up, but when he stopped taking them he felt himself going all to pieces. Now the Doctor is giving him a new treatment by injections and it doesn't seem to be doing him much good, but the Doctor has been so kind that he hesitates to offend him by getting a second opinion.

Sasha's old Colonel walks past. He does not see them, but Sasha commences to rail against him and the King.

Stephanie comments upon how much more bitter his feelings have become in these last few weeks.

A dog comes up and nuzzles round in a friendly way. Suddenly Sasha kicks it and it lopes off with a yelp of pain.

"Why did you do that, Sasha?" Stephanie exclaims. "You are so gentle. I did not think you could ever be unkind to a dumb animal."

"I'm sorry," he says, with a shake of his head. "I didn't mean to. I just feel like that. Everyone I see irritates me in these days except you."

A look of fear and understanding passes over her face. She leans forward and kisses him on the cheek.

We next see Sasha in the mean lodging that he has taken. He is seated at a table with a small note-book before him. In it there are half a dozen names and addresses. The top one is that of Stephanie. The second that of Doctor Pailev, which has a large question mark against it. He takes a piece of rubber and rubs Stephanie's name out. Then he draws a piece of writing-paper towards him and commences a letter.

He stands up and passes his hand wearily over his eyes, then picks up the letter from the table, which we see is addressed to Hans Kartoff, No. 7, Tiergarten Gasser—the King's valet. After which we see him post this letter in the street. He is obviously laying an information against such members of the Terrorist group as he has so far come in contact with, except Stephanie.

Now we see the Doctor in his sitting-room with a group of his fellow Terrorists. He is telling them that Sasha is nearly ready. The King is to open the new wing of the Institute for Medical Research on the 13th of the month—an extra dose for Sasha and he will do their business for them.

The King is then shown in his private study as in the first set. He has Sasha's letter in his hand and the Chief of the Police is standing before him. The King is informing his minister of his arrangement with the young cashiered officer. He has not mentioned the matter before because he feared that if Sasha were given any assistance or seen conversing with any police officers it might arouse suspicion in the minds of the Terrorists. Since Sasha is untrained in such work the King is surprised that he has even managed to get so far as producing the names of five suspected people, and as an amateur it is quite impossible to expect him to be able to trace the heads of the whole organization on his own. He instructs the Chief of Police, therefore, to put his own people on to watch the persons that Sasha has named as suspects, in the hope that they may now be able to get to the root of the whole conspiracy. But Sasha, meanwhile, is to be

left to continue his work in ignorance that the police are secretly co-operating with him.

As the Chief of Police is shown out the Queen comes in. She begins to protest about the King's plan for opening the new wing of the Medical Research building himself, and asks: "But must you do this, Nicholas—is it really necessary?"

"Of course, my dear," he assures her kindly. "It is a thing which we have been looking forward to for months. Why, nearly a quarter of your own private income has gone into it for these last two years."

"But, Nicholas!" she exclaims.

"Now, now," he laughs. "No tarradiddles to me. I know that I am not supposed to know what you do with your own money, but I do. I am one of those inquisitive people who know lots of things that they are not supposed to know. But seriously, everyone expects me to open the new wing myself."

"My dear, I know. But every time you go out into the streets I tremble for your safety. You even refuse to have proper guards."

"Of course. They would say that I was a coward if I did, and then there would be twice as many of them wanting to shoot at me. Be patient, Caroline my dear. If we can only last out for another few years they will come to understand me better—and they will not want to shoot at me at all. In the meantime you must be brave, my love."

We return to the Doctor's surgery. He is injecting Sasha with a hypodermic in the arm. Stephanie is standing by. Sasha's face has become dull and lifeless. He hardly seems to feel the needle.

"There, my boy," says the Doctor cheerfully. "That will relieve the pains in your head." Sasha pulls himself together and makes to leave the room as Stephanie whispers to him:

"I will be with you in a minute, but I want to talk to the Doctor first about myself." Sasha nods dumbly and shambles out of the doorway.

Stephanie then turns on the Doctor and there is a big scene. "I can't go through with it," she protests. "I can't."

He fixes her with a cold glare: "You found him. He is the perfect implement that we have been seeking for years. How dare you even suggest that we should go back upon our purpose?"

Her eyes fall before his glance. Then he becomes tender and comforting. "Stephanie, this is not like you. Have you not been the heart and soul of all our endeavours for the past three years? Do you forget what they did to your father? On the thirteenth we shall be free I tell you—free!"

She presses her hands to her face. "But not that way," she murmurs. "Not though him."

"Yes, through him," he repeats insistently. "And yours will be the glory. You brought him to us. You will be the most honoured woman in the country."

"Oh, I don't care—I don't want to be," she cries miserably. "There must be some other way to do this thing."

He places his hands on her shoulders and stares down into her face. Under his magnetic glance she quails and at last nods reluctantly.

"All right," she mutters. "If it must be him—if Sasha feels that way himself."

The Arts Club again. Sasha and Stephanie are seated at a table. He is staring gloomily in front of him, now obviously completely in the grip of the drug. She is watching his face with anxious concern. The camera travels round to a bar above which a large calendar is hanging. It shows the date to be the 12th of the month.

"Sasha," she murmurs desperately, "we are going away together, aren't we? Why not let's go to-night?"

"Yes, we are going away," he echoes, with slow dogged firmness. "But not to-night. There is something I've got to do to-morrow—I can't think clearly now—don't remember what it is, but they keep on telling me—and it's important. We're going to save the country. That's right—and I've been picked to do it. I've got to look at the big star on his chest. The big star—and aim for that."

A meeting of the Terrorists in the Doctor's room that night. A small model of a street with buildings is on the table, and in the midst of them four miniature motor-cars are placed at intervals along the roadway. Little lead figures are set at intervals along either pavement to represent the police.

"And you, Rudolf," the Doctor is saying to a swarthy man, "will take care of number three." As he speaks he touches one of the miniature policemen with his forefinger and turns it over. "Directly our man runs forward out of the crowd, you thrust this fellow from behind and trip him, then make your getaway as quickly as you can. You, Marino, will tackle number four . . ."

The door opens and Stephanie comes bursting in.

"Stop!" she cries desperately. "I won't have it. Sasha is half-crazy now with the drug. If he wants to do it when he's sane—then all right, but I won't have him sent to his death—as he is."

"You won't?" says the Doctor quietly.

"Yes," she flares out. "If you weren't a lot of cowards one of you would do it yourselves—not get a poor drugged imbecile for your instrument. This has got to stop—if not . . ."

"Well," says the Doctor icily. "If not—what?"

"I'll give myself up—give you all away. Do you understand?"

"I see." The Doctor nods to two of his men, who grab her before she can reach the door.

She is hustled forward to face him and he says stonily: "You have done your work, and I think it will be best if you are kept quiet now until it is all over."

Despite her struggles, the sleeve of her dress is ripped away and she is held by the Terrorists while the Doctor gives her an injection in the arm. A trap-door is then opened up in the floor and she is led down into a cellar. They leave her, closing the trap above her head.

In the cellar she looks dazedly round for a moment, stumbles forward and falls across a rough bed. Then she sinks down upon it and falls asleep.

The King in full uniform on the following morning. The Chief of the Police is informing him that all the ramifications of the Terrorist

organization are now known. Every one of them is a marked man, and he urges their immediate arrest.

However, the King will not agree to this. He says that if there is no attempt on his life wholesale arrests are certain to cause popular indignation. Now that the police know who to watch they can give him adequate protection. Let them make their attempt if they mean to. The police can close in on them immediately and the people will then be in sympathy with the Government when their execution is ordered. Personally, he does not think there will be any attempt that day or they would have received some warning from his young protégé Lieutenant Sasha Renescu. The King then asks for news of Sasha.

The Chief of the Police reports that he was at the New Arts Club the night before with the girl, who left him there; and that half an hour later two of the others called for him and accompanied him to the Doctor's house, where he still is.

The chief of Police retires with a last assurance that there is nothing to be feared since all his arrangements are perfected. Every Terrorist will be covered during the whole time of the procession. We then catch a glimpse of him in the corridor giving instructions to three of his principal men.

We now see the Queen taking leave of the King. She is trying to put a brave face on it, but is obviously terribly nervous for him. He is laughing and gay as usual, and tells her lightly that he will be back in time for tea. Then, that there is just one thing that she can do for him.

She leans forward earnestly and he whispers in her ear. "See that the muffins are not overcooked. You know how I adore muffins."

We move now to Sasha, dull-eyed and lethargic, with Doctor Pailev, standing on a quiet street-corner. The Doctor is repeating patiently: "You will jump on the running-board of the car, you understand?"

Sasha replies tonelessly: "The running-board of the car—what car?"

"The car," says the Doctor. "The fourth car in the procession—but I shall be with you and I will give you a push. You know what to do then?"

"I must aim at the star on his breast," Sasha says, slowly repeating his well-learned lesson.

"That's right," the Doctor goes on. "At the star on his breast. You will be the saviour of our country."

"The saviour of our country."

"And Stephanie will be waiting for you," the Doctor adds swiftly.

"Stephanie—yes, Stephanie will be waiting," repeats Sasha.

The cellar below the Doctor's clinic. Stephanie wakes from her sleep; memory floods back to her. She looks at her wrist-watch.

The time is ten past two. Suddenly we see all the meaning of that flash upon her face. She staggers to her feet, runs up the ladder and struggles with the trap-door. It is bolted on the upper side. She cannot shift it. She bangs upon it violently.

The King getting into his car outside the Palace.

Sasha and the Doctor pushing their way through the crowd.

Stephanie battering upon the trap-door with a broken chair in an endeavour to smash it open.

The King's car moving off. The crowd cheering.

The Doctor and Sasha wedged in the front of the crowd. We recognize Rudolf and Marino behind the two nearest policemen, who are stationed a good ten yards apart. We also recognize the faces of the Chief of Police's principal men, covering them.

The King's car entering the main street.

A 'shot' of the crowd lining the pavement silent but expectant. Police are stationed at every ten yards or so, and between two of them, with a clear run into the roadway, we see Sasha with the Doctor just behind him.

The Chief of Police's car driving up to the Doctor's clinic. As he tumbles out with several men he says to one of them: "It's too good an opportunity to miss raiding this place for their papers now they're all out." They enter the house.

The King in his car bowing right and left to the cheering multitude.

The crowd. Sasha with vague staring eyes clutching a bulky object in his pocket. The Doctor's face appears over his shoulder; beads of perspiration are running from his big bald forehead.

Stephanie being hauled out of the cellar by the Chief of Police and his men. She gasps out that there is a plot to kill the King. The Chief of Police gives a quiet smile and says indifferently: "You needn't worry, young woman. We've got all your friends covered."

The King's car moving at walking-pace down the principal street.

The crowd leaning forward to peer at it as it approaches in the distance. Sasha alone remains staring stolidly to his front, vacant-eyed.

Stephanie wildly imploring the Chief of Police to listen to her. "But you don't understand," she wails. "It is Lieutenant Sasha Renescu who is going to do it."

"Nonsense," he laughs. "He has been working for us, and it is he who has given you all away."

A man running out of the crowd towards the King's car a hundred yards lower down the street than the place where Sasha is standing. The King presses a button; the car comes to a halt. Two policemen have rushed forward, but the man is only presenting a paper. It is a petition. The King accepts with his charming smile. The car moves on.

A 'shot' of Stephanie on the pavement outside the clinic still arguing with the Chief of Police. She beats her hands upon his breast and cries: "I implore you to believe me."

The King's car. It is moving on again at a walking-pace. He is almost level with the place where Sasha stands. Sasha's mouth is set; his eyes are fixed upon the roadway.

Suddenly he turns and grips the Doctor by the arm. Up to this point we are still not quite certain if Sasha has really fallen under the influence of the drug or if he has been playing a part in order to unmask the Terrorists single-handed.

The King is smiling and bowing.

The Doctor shakes himself free and gives Sasha a push. Sasha suddenly pulls himself upright and dashes forward into the empty street towards the car.

Two detectives instantly tackle Rudolf and Marino. Two others seize the Doctor from behind.

Sasha has drawn his gun. He points it at the King. We see the King's face. He is overcome by horror and distress as he recognizes Sasha. He half stands up and shouts: "Lieutenant Renescu!"

We see Sasha halt dazedly. His pistol circles unsteadily. A look of mad resolve comes into his eyes. He lowers his head in an effort to aim at the star on the King's breast.

The crowd fighting and struggling. The Chief of Police hitting out right and left as he forces his way through. Stephanie, ducking under his arm, rushes forward and flings herself on Sasha from behind just as he fires. The bullet goes wide. They both go down together in the roadway.

The police and troops rushing forward. The shouting crowd. Sasha and Stephanie hauled to their feet. The King presses his button again and the car halts. He leans forward, gives a quick look at Sasha and then says quietly to the perspiring Chief of Police who is now beside the car: "You will answer to me for it that neither of those two is hurt. Take them at once to the Palace. I shall wish to see them immediately I get back."

Suddenly there is a new commotion in the crowd. The Doctor, with a heave of his powerful shoulders, throws the two detectives off and draws a pistol. He points it at the King and fires.

The King sinks back on the cushions of his car. The Doctor turns the pistol upon himself and fires again. The crowd and police obscure his falling body.

The King's head suddenly emerges again over the side of the car. "Has he quite finished?" he says, with his quiet smile to the Chief of Police. "If so, we will go on."

We now see the King's study. Sasha is seated with his head between his hands. Stephanie is seated near him on the edge of a chair, wild-eyed and desperate. Enter the King.

He places a hand upon Stephanie's shoulder. "We have them all, my dear, all those poor misguided people who are so unkind that they would make away with me. But it never occurred to us that they would make an assassin out of him. I owe my escape this afternoon entirely to you. How can I repay you?"

Two large tears run down her cheeks as she stands up. She nods silently towards Sasha: "Give him to me. He does not know what has happened. He is ill—terribly ill. Oh, please let me take him away with me and make him well, Your Majesty."

"Willingly. He has rendered me a very great service. If it had not been for his information I might have been shot by someone else to-day. The one thing that we could not foresee was that in acting the part he had to play, it would be necessary for him to take that terrible drug, and that all unknowing he fell a victim to it. His

attempt upon my life was entirely my own fault because I sent him into this business. He is one of the Officers of my Guard."

"I know," she stammers. "He was . . ."

"He is," says the King firmly. "Lieutenant Sasha Renescu!"

Sasha passes a hand across his face and stands up. "Sire!"

"It is my pleasure that you take leave of absence for six months and this lady has my orders to see that you do not return until that time is up. After that you will report again for duty." His voice softens and he places a hand upon each of their shoulders. "Go to England for a little rest, my children. Things are happier there."

As they go out they stand aside a moment for the Queen to enter. The door closes, and the King smiles at his wife, as he takes her hand.

"You see after all, my dear, there was nothing to be worried about; only an accident on the part of one of these people will ever deprive me of the one thing I value—your dear company."

He turns then towards the fire-place where a dish is set in homely comfort, and murmurs: "Now I do hope that the muffins are not burnt. You know how I adore muffins."

STORY XV

THE OPERATIVE SENTENCE OF THIS STORY IS "IF YOU SO MUCH AS LAY a finger on him you'll find yourself in prison for assault". What an encouraging remark with which to send out a subordinate if, as one of our Secret Service Chiefs, you were detailing him to bring in a foreign neutral whom you were convinced was in communication with the enemy! Yet there is very good reason to suppose that this was the attitude adopted by our Home Office in the early months of the war.

Having before us Hitler's New Order in Europe none of us can question the blessings of Democracy; yet one may still question the sense of allowing ourselves to be governed, either in peace or war, by any Cabinet including a number of elderly ostriches.

I am no politician, but I pray most earnestly that a time is coming when the people of Britain will no longer suffer men to remain in office who in the past have shown themselves incapable of true leadership and blind, even to the dictates of simple common sense, where the security of the nation is concerned.

CHANNEL CROSSING

"THAT Belgian, De Casteraux, is crossing again to-morrow." Sir Charles Forsyth's glance was bleak, and it was easy to see why the personnel of his highly secret department had nicknamed him 'Old Frosty'; "this time we've got to get him with the goods—I'm giving the job to you."

Vivien Pawlett-Browne—or plain V. Brown as he was on the register—looked distinctly uncomfortable, but his long, curling lashes hid his dismay as he said: "I suppose the law hasn't been altered overnight, sir—I mean, to permit my taking a piece of lead piping in my pocket?"

"No such luck. De Casteraux's a neutral. We're so certain that he's in the pay of the enemy that in any other country he'd be put up against a brick wall and shot, but we've got no proof. His luggage has been searched several times, but without results. We can't issue a warrant, and you know that we're not allowed to strip a neutral without one."

"He might take his information over by word of mouth," Vivien hazarded.

"Nonsense! He's employed by Empire Aircraft Ltd., and it's the intricate engine plans of our newest machines that he's getting. As he's not a designer it would be impossible for him to carry anything so complicated in his head. He must hide the papers somewhere about his person, but if you so much as lay a finger on him you'll find yourself in prison for assault. He is sailing from Dover on the mid-day boat."

Vivien enlisted the co-operation of his colleagues 'Big Beard' and 'Little Whiskers'. Actually both of them were clean-shaven, but both were extremely secretive, which, together with the fact that one was very tall and the other very short, had resulted in their departmental nicknames.

Next day the rain beat in Vivien's eyes as he followed the *Maid of Orleans*' passengers out of the Customs shed; keeping a short, bowler-hatted figure in sight. As they neared the boat a porter with a barrow of luggage came running along the dock, yelling: "Mind your backs, please—mind your backs."

The short man had his head buried in the collar of his overcoat. When the barrow hit him he staggered sideways and fell into the oily water with an angry, frightened shout.

Vivien grimaced. 'Big Beard' had done his stuff, now it was up to him. With a slight shudder he dived off the quayside to the rescue.

De Casteraux came to the surface gasping for breath and clutching his hat to his head. Two minutes later, half supported by Vivien, willing hands helped him to safety. They were both taken aboard wet through and grey with cold. A sympathetic purser showed them into a cabin and after giving them two large towels went off to find dressing-gowns for them whilst their clothes were being dried.

The Belgian's gratitude was overwhelming. He kissed the embarrassed Vivien on both cheeks, introduced himself and declared dramatically that he was Vivien's friend for life.

Vivien grinned sheepishly and began to strip. De Casteraux followed suit, first carefully removing his bowler hat; then all their garments were carried off and, having dried themselves, they covered their nakedness with the dressing-gowns they had been lent.

Sitting on the bunk, Vivien listened to the chatter of his companion, who was praising England and the English in glowing terms; but he kept his eye on his watch, which was of the type that does not suffer from being submerged in water.

After twenty minutes he suggested amiably that they should have a cognac, and closing the door carefully behind him went outside to give the order to the steward.

"Well?" he asked, as in answer to his shout Little Whiskers appeared.

"Search me," his small colleague shrugged. "The mean punk hasn't as much as a meal ticket in his clothes."

Vivien frowned. "But damn it; after he'd stripped he was as naked as a new-born babe."

"Might be somewhere on the prospective corpse," Little Whiskers suggested.

"But where? He couldn't possibly have crammed a blue-print into one of his ears or a hollow tooth."

"When Big Beard gave him the works he grabbed his hat, but there wasn't the smell of an oil-rag in it."

Vivien suddenly snapped his fingers. "I've got it. He's wearing a wig. But it is a darn good one. I thought it a bit odd when he didn't dry his hair with the towel—although it was wringing wet.

He just patted the waves into place—I put it down to vanity at the time.”

“If that’s so, sweetheart, you’re in a jam,” was Little Whiskers’ unhelpful contribution. “Consider the lilies and all that. If you touch one hair of his golden head you’ll be for it; unless you get the goods. The beak will condole with the poor stranger who has made his home within our gates and you’ll be sent to pick oakum with your teeth!”

“Don’t I know it,” Vivien growled. “Go and get me two double brandies. Maybe I’ll have thought of something by the time you bring them down.”

Ten minutes later Little Whiskers knocked on the cabin door. As Vivien opened it to take in the drinks he was singing the refrain of the old song—‘We’ll all cling together like the ivy on the old garden wall’—noticing which, Little Whiskers winked.

Their clothes were brought to them and, when they had dressed, their hats; the Belgian’s was handed to him brim down. He put it on and remained with Vivien till the boat docked.

On deck Vivien and De Casteraux shook hands; the Belgian lifted his hat with a flourish. As his wig came away with it Vivien’s heart missed a beat. No papers fluttered down—his plan had failed.

Realizing what had happened De Casteraux hastily crammed his wig back on his head, but in the intervening seconds Vivien had glimpsed a pattern of brown lines and circles on the Belgian’s bald pate. The drawings of the engines had been photographed upon it.

As De Casteraux caught Vivien’s eye he dived for the rail, but Vivien grabbed his shoulder. “You don’t want a second ducking, do you?” his voice was mocking, “just because we put a little seccotine round the inner rim of your hat. We’re going back to England, the Land of the Free, but I don’t think you’ll be granted the privileges of a neutral any more.”

STORY XVI

I HAVE DRUNK CYPRUS WINE SOMEWHERE ABOUT A HUNDRED YEARS OF age; but that was retrieved from an old cellar, and I confess that I have never even tasted a modern vintage.

Therefore this is no doubt an ill-chosen place to dilate upon the subject of wine at all; yet I shall do so, none the less.

It is my good fortune to be descended from a family of wine merchants; so, even as good journalists boast that they were born with 'ink in their veins', I might say that I have 'wine in my blood'; and, seeing that I have never yet said no to my share of a good bottle, I have far better grounds than they have for any such assumption.

In view of my upbringing and personal predilections it is hardly surprising that most of the characters in my books should like good liquor in one form or another; and that the contents of the bottles which give them special joy should be described in some detail.

On the other hand, I have no special knowledge of law, medicine, architecture, church rituals, or a hundred other matters. Yet, when such subjects must be dealt with in my stories I at least take the trouble to ring up someone or other who I think should know and thus, in most cases, get my data correct. Why in the world is it that so few of my fellow scribes take the same small pains to secure expert guidance when they have cause to refer to a bottle of wine?

I have known authors of the highest repute depict a scene in irreproachable English where a man takes a woman out to dinner and, after considerable palaver with the wine list, selects for her delight a bottle of Beaune 1922 or Liebfraumilch 1930, which are afterwards described as though they were the most succulent rarities; when in fact both vintages were so poor that they were never even shipped to this country, and the names convey nothing to a connoisseur except the sort of stuff you could get in peace-time at five shillings a bottle from the little grocer round the corner.

If they wish to mellow their heroine to a sympathetic understanding, why not give the wench a bottle of Chambertin, Grande Eschavaux, or Château Ausone? or, if she prefers white wine, gaze into her eyes as she sips the golden glory of a Schloss Johannisberg, Steinberg 'Cabinet', or Château Yquem; and, for goodness' sake, let them get the vintage right.

The nearest wine-merchant will, I am sure, be only too delighted to set any author right, and will be thrilled into the bargain at the thought that he has supplied half a line which may appear one day in a novel. To authors, young or old, who are afraid of admitting their ignorance, I willingly offer my services as a father-confessor. The seal of secrecy shall cover our correspondence, and I will provide them with full particulars of the requisite tipples to suit every occasion.

A DEAL IN CYPRUS WINE

P. ROCKINGHAM BUDD was bored. Every line of his opulent seventeen stone figure and expensive mottled countenance proclaimed that fact aloud. He sat opposite to me, gloomy and silent, on the verandah of the little hotel in Famagusta.

I had been on a Mediterranean cruise the winter before, and had decided, then and there, never to try another. I had wanted rest and quiet and sunshine. I had got hustle and noise and a drizzling rain for the western end of the trip. Incredible bores had pestered me continually to join the sports, or make up a four at bridge—no, thank you, never again. That's why I came straight out to Athens this time, with my mind made up to take the first ship that offered—provided that its passenger accommodation was not for more than ten.

In the hotel at Athens I had struck up an acquaintance with the jovial American. For a couple of days Mr. P. Rockingham Budd and I had gone round the town together—then he had suggested that we took a boat to Cyprus. I liked the idea, and we sailed for Famagusta the following day.

Cyprus is a delightful spot with its wooded hills, vine-covered slopes, and fertile plain, but we were a little disappointed, all the same. The island has been civilized ever since the arrival of its first masters, the Egyptians, nearly four thousand years ago. Phoenicians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Turks, have all held it since, and we had hoped to see many more of the lovely ancient things than have actually survived.

There are a few Greek temples, ruined and overgrown, but those vandals the Turks destroyed nearly everything that wasn't too great and solid for them during their long mastery of the place. After four days we had seen everything of interest in the island.

There were few people staying in the hotel, and none who looked as if he would prove amusing on acquaintance. It was the sixth day of our stay, and we had another twenty-four hours to go before the boat left for Beirut, in the Lebanon, which was to be our next place of call.

I was perfectly content to sit watching the white-sailed boats come and go in the little harbour, and the picturesque Greek labourers as they strolled by in the sunshine, but P. Rockingham Budd was bored.

A shadow suddenly fell across our table, and, glancing up, I saw that a most striking-looking man had halted beside us.

He was broad of shoulder and slim of hip, his suit of cream-coloured gaberdine fitted his tall figure most neatly. He had handsome features of the Spanish type, an olive complexion, a small dark moustache, and a little tuft of an imperial on his chin.

He took off his broad-brimmed soft hat with a tremendous flourish, and addressed himself to Budd.

"Your pardon, Señor, but I am told you make a short stay in our beautiful island," he said in excellent English. "Allow me to introduce myself—I am Don Louis Xermes D'Ulloa."

"Pleased to be acquainted, Don," replied my large friend. "Sit right down—you're welcome."

The fellow bowed again and took a chair. "It is a pleasure always," he smiled, "to meet your countrymen—and yours, Señor," he added, bowing in my direction. "Social life, as you have no doubt discovered, is almost non-existent here, and a man such as myself, who comes from one of the best families in Spain, cannot, of course, mix with a riff-raff of Greek traders."

"Dear me," I thought, "what does this bird want to borrow?" But to P. Rockingham Budd it was an excellent excuse for another round of drinks. He beckoned up the waiter with one fat hand and smiled genially. "It certainly must be lonesome if you live in this place all the time," he agreed.

"That is my fate," acknowledged the swarthy stranger. "All my interests are in the island, and I am compelled to reside here for the greater part of the year. I suppose you have seen most of the usual sights already?"

"Sure," nodded Budd, "but if you could put us on to anything noo we'd be real grateful."

Don Louis lit a long, thin cigar, and waved it thoughtfully under his nose as he inhaled the aroma. "Perhaps, Señor," he suggested, "you might care to drive up to my Quinta in the hills—that is it over there."

He pointed with his cigar to a long white villa far away on the other side of the blue bay. It looked a beautiful place, isolated among its green woods and vineyards, high up above the town.

P. Rockingham nodded. "Vury good of you, Don—I reckon that's a nice place you've got there."

"It has a pleasant situation," agreed the other gracefully. "I shall be honoured if you care to go so far—the view from the terrace is not to be surpassed in Cyprus, and I have some pictures which it might interest you to see."

I did not know what to make of the man. I thought it queer that he should seek us out, for all his glib excuse. In any case, there was no point in sitting in that dull hotel all day, and Budd accepted with alacrity.

We finished our drinks and the Spaniard led us to an ancient Ford. It seemed a strange conveyance for the owner of the lovely villa on the hill; but for all its clank and rattle the engine did its work. Soon we were climbing the rough, uneven road outside the town. Higher and higher we went, now through little woods of cork-trees, then out again on to the bare mountain-side with its occasional cactus and scrub. Each time we came into the open the prospect below us became more and more beautiful. The road wound and twisted up a succession of gradients, each ending in a hairpin bend. Sometimes we passed places where the cement wall had crumbled—a fall over the edge meant a sheer drop to a hundred feet below. Don Louis drove more rapidly than I cared for; I think I gasped once as he swung the car round a more than usually dangerous turning. Budd grinned.

"'Tain't nothin' to motorin' in the Yoshmite Valley, back home,"

he laughed. "That's the place that hands out the real flicker thrills."

My fears proved groundless, and we pulled up safely in front of the lovely villa. It was even larger than it had appeared from the other side of the bay.

As we got out I noticed that all the windows were shuttered, there were no signs of life, and the place seemed quite untenanted. Don Louis apologized with an airy wave of his hand.

"I have been in Nicosia for some days, and am but just returned this morning—my servants did not expect me back so soon." As he spoke he pulled the bell, which jangled with a plaintive sound somewhere in the servants' quarters.

Eventually the door was opened by a decrepit old man. Our host spoke quickly to him in Greek and bowed us in.

It was a magnificent place, that villa of Don Louis D'Ulloa's. The entrance hall was of cool, clean marble with a great staircase of beaten brass and ironwork, covered with coroneted coats-of-arms which led up to the rooms above. There were several fine pieces of statuary, and on the walls were pictures shrouded in sheets which the old servant drew aside as we wandered round under Don Louis's guidance.

"That," he said, pointing to a fine painting of a man in black armour with a pointed beard, "is my ancestor who fought under the famous Duke of Alva in the Low Countries, and this," he indicated a cavalier in silks and ribbons, "is the one who was so unfortunate as to incur the displeasure of King Carlos—it was for that reason that my family settled in Cyprus."

P. Rockingham was most interested. He strolled about with his hands in his trouser pockets and an unlit cigar protruding at a rakish angle from the corner of his mouth, while the Spaniard led us through a succession of beautiful rooms.

I was puzzled. The place had not the air of being lived in, and I was more than ever convinced that Don Louis had some ulterior motive in bringing us there.

After a while he led us out on to the terrace; he had not exaggerated—the view was superb. The little lemon buildings of the town lay far below us, encircled by the verdure of the hills, the blue Mediterranean sparkled in the sunlight beneath a cloudless sky.

We sat down in the shade of some vines that had been trained over a trellis. The bright sunshine piercing the vine-leaves threw little patches of golden light on the warm stones at our feet. An emerald-coloured lizard sat on a neighbouring rock and flickered his golden tongue as he watched us out of his expressionless sparkling eyes. I wish he could have answered all the questions I was dying to ask!

The old servant came out to us carrying glasses and a dirt-encrusted bottle. "Permit me to offer you a glass of Cyprus wine," said Don Louis. "It is little known in Europe these days, but it was famous with the Romans and Phœnicians before there were vineyards at Bordeaux."

As he spoke he poured the golden liquid into the long-stemmed glasses, and proffered them with a charming gesture.

P. Rockingham accepted one and held it up. "Waal, here's to Don—it's real kind of you to have taken pity on us strangers." He put the glass to his lips and sipped—his round eyes opened wide and his thick eyebrows went up as he exclaimed: "By Golly! this is some wine; I'll say those Romans knew a thing or two."

It was not the drink I should have chosen on so warm a day. Rhinebolter or iced Pilsner would have been more to my liking, but it was certainly wonderful stuff; as heavy as port and with a magnificent bouquet. It had the rich, luscious flavour of the muscat grape.

Don Louis smiled and bowed. "Señor," he said, "I am happy that you should appreciate this wine—it is fifty years old and not to be replaced."

"Yepp," nodded Budd, "it's great stuff. I just had no sort of notion that the people hereabouts produced this sort of goods—I'd sooner drink the stuff the bootleggers hand out to a mutt than touch the dishwasher at our hotel."

The Spaniard smiled. "That does not surprise me; the Cypriots are lazy and they do not understand the treatment of fine wine. They drink of the last year's vintage instead of fortifying it and leaving it to mature undisturbed. If such things interest you I will take you to taste those which are in my big cellar in the town."

"That's real nice of you," declared Budd promptly.

We finished the bottle between us, and having once more admired the view, strolled back to Don Louis's car.

The descent into Famagusta seemed almost more dangerous than the journey up, but we arrived in safety and were driven to some outbuildings at the back of the town.

Don Louis unlocked a rusty padlock that secured a pair of heavy doors, and we entered an open courtyard. On one side were some empty stables, on the other some sheds that had at one time been a cooperage. Our guide led us to the wine lodge, which occupied the far end of the yard, and unlocked another door.

It was pleasant there in the cool semi-darkness after the glare of the hot sun on the white buildings outside, and I looked round with interest. In pyramids and rows on the scantlings were ranged a number of large casks.

The Spaniard walked over to one and knocked out the bung at the top of the cask. "Come, Señor, taste this," he said, taking glasses and a long rubber tube from a cupboard. "My grandfather put this down in 1860—it is very fine."

He inserted one end of the tube in the hole, and placing the other end to his mouth, drew a sharp breath. The wine syphoned out into the glass he held ready.

P. Rockingham took it and sniffed, then he sipped a little. "Say, Don," he exclaimed, "there's some kick in that." He passed the glass to me. In colour it was golden brown, and I could taste a flavour like nuts—as in a fine sherry.

Don Louis led us to the other end of the cellar. "And this, Señor,"

he smiled, "there are six butts of it—it is the least good, yet it is a palatable wine."

I tasted it, and though it had not the body of the other I thought it was in some ways a pleasanter drink on a sultry day.

He stood by us, tall and dark and smiling as we praised his cellar, then suddenly he seemed to become a little sad.

"I am most happy, Señors, that I should have met you to-day; had it been to-morrow, it would no longer have been in my power to show you these beautiful wines."

"Why," I asked, "have you sold them all?"

"Alas, yes," he sighed. "I do not come of a race of business men, and my affairs—they have not prospered—I owe much money, so my wines must go."

"Say, now, if that isn't a real shame," exclaimed Budd sympathetically.

"Yes," I agreed, "after they have been in your family all these years!" and wondered what was coming next.

Don Louis scowled. Suddenly he broke out: "Behold, Señor, what can I do? I am no longer wealthy and I must have money. There is a debt that I cannot pay. These marvellous wines pass to a miserable Jew for a mean eight thousand dollars."

"Eight thousand dollars?" repeated P. Rockingham quickly; "that seems a poor sort of price, Don—I'll say there are all of fifty barrels here; it's no more than a hundred and sixty dollars apiece all round."

The Spaniard waved his hand. "It is true," he cried vehemently, "forty-seven butts and I am being robbed—I know it. The wine which you have first tasted, Señor, is worth five hundred dollars the butt—but what will you?" he shrugged. "To ship them to France or England, it is useless—who is there that knows anything of Cyprus wine to-day? They must go, therefore, to that infernal Jew—ah, *Dios!* I hate the thought."

I calculated rapidly. "There are about fifty-four dozen to the butt, aren't there?" I said, "that's about three dollars, say fifteen shillings the dozen—it seems incredibly cheap."

Budd nodded and turned to the Spaniard. "I've a hunch I'm going to make you an offer, Don; I could ship 'em out to the Bahamas. I'm acquainted with a rum-runner who'd land 'em on the Florida Keys. I could do with a butt or two at my place in Missouri, and I guess I could split the rest among my friends."

When Don Louis had first mentioned his troubles it had occurred to me that he meant to try and sell us some dozens of his wine, but it seemed a gigantic quantity for any private man to take. Still, I had gathered that P. Rockingham was by no means short of money, and if he could turn most of it over to his friends it was dirt cheap at the price—anyhow, it was not my affair.

The Spaniard did not attempt to conceal his pleasure at Budd's suggestion. "Señor," he cried, "to know that these wines will be drunk by one who will appreciate them—that would console me greatly for their loss."

"Let's try this feller here." P. Rockingham tapped a cask near which he was standing.

Don Louis gripped the bung, but it was wedged fast—he could not get it out. "No matter," he cried, moving down the line to another, "try this, these eight are all the same."

We tasted it and approved; Budd pointed to another. "I guess we'll sample that one there."

"That," said Don Louis, "is the same as the second wine which you tried just now."

"O.K., Don." P. Rockingham's round face was wreathed in smiles, "Let's have a crack at the end one there."

Again the bung proved to be immovable. Don Louis shrugged. "All, Señor, are wines of pedigree, none are of a lesser quality than the second one you saw."

Budd nodded. "All right, don't worry, I'll bid you—no, wait! I guess I don't know much about the price of wines. I reckon it 'ud be best to con-fab-u-late with an independent judge before I make an offer."

Don Louis drew himself up. "Señor," he said haughtily.

"No offence, Don," cut in the American, "I'm just a plain business man." His bovine face was wreathed in smiles.

After all, it was a reasonable suggestion, and it was impossible for the Spaniard to take umbrage. He nodded.

"I do not understand business, Señor, but I would prefer that you should have my wines rather than the Jew—what do you propose?"

"See here," P. Rockingham suggested, "we'll get old Lyckidopolous from the hotel to come around and taste 'em; he'll sure be a judge, all right—maybe he'll buy some himself."

A troubled look came into Don Louis's dark eyes. "I regret, Señor, but to that I cannot agree," he said slowly. "It is my misfortune that I owe money to Lyckidopolous; my name must not be mentioned to him. If he learns that I am disposing of the wines he will press for the repayment of his debt."

For a moment Budd was lost in thought; then he said: "I'll tell you how we'll fix it; let's cart those three barrels that we've tasted round to the hotel. I'll spill the yarn that I've bought 'em in a rash moment, and I'm up against the trouble of shipping 'em away—then he'll give us a line as to what he thinks they're worth."

Don Louis smiled. "That is a different matter, Señor, and while Lyckidopolous is not rich enough to buy the whole, he might relieve you of some part, since they have few wines of quality in the hotel."

We went out into the street and secured an ox-wagon—also some casual labour. The three heavy casks were loaded on to the cart with some difficulty, Don Louis re-padded the door of the bodega, and we followed the wagon through the narrow streets.

To the hook-nosed Greek hotel proprietor, P. Rockingham explained his purchases. The casks were unloaded and samples drawn. The wines had muddied slightly in transit, but Lyckidopolous knew enough to judge their value.

His small eyes gleamed as he smelled the wine of the finest quality, but the price he suggested to begin with was ridiculous. Budd laughed at him. "Say, Licky," he grinned, "don't try any of the funny stuff—I only cashed out for 'em yesterday. Sooner than take your bid I'll cart 'em round the world and drink 'em as I go."

The Greek saw a bargain slipping, and became more reasonable. After much haggling we got him up to three hundred dollars for the best, two hundred and ten for the second, and one hundred and fifty for the third.

"Six-sixty for the lot—O.K.," said P. Rockingham; "they're yours, Licky, but this is a spot cash deal—I want the dough."

The Greek agreed to send to the bank for the money, and we left him. I was a little worried about the affair. Why should our noble Spaniard let his wine go at an average of 170 dollars the butt when a swindling Greek was willing to pay 220. There must be something fishy somewhere. I said as much to P. Rockingham Budd when he returned from a visit to his room.

"Don't worry, friend," he grinned, "Don Ullo's in trouble in this town, he's owing money all round—I guess we're his only stone safe market."

We rejoined Don Louis—he had not wished to accompany us to the hotel. "Well, Señor?" he asked, "have you decided?"

"Yep, and I'm no mean skate—I'll go two grand over that Jew. Ten thousand dollars for the lot, and I reckon it's cheap at the price." Budd produced a bulging notecase from his pocket and began to count out the cash. It must have been that for which he had been up to his room. I was amazed that he should be fool enough to travel with such a large sum in his luggage, and said so. He laughed. "Guess you never know when it'll come in handy to have a wad of greenbacks lying around," and he continued to count out the crisp new notes into the Spaniard's hand.

Don Louis took them eagerly. "I am your debtor, Señor," he smiled with a flash of his white teeth. "Here are the keys of my wine lodge—the contents are now your property. I am more than grateful."

"Thanks, Don." P. Rockingham passed over the keys to me. "Say, you might look after these, friend. I'm a perfect rube on keys, I'd sure lose 'em."

"And now," Don Louis gave his graceful bow, "you must permit me to offer you a little lunch; my house, as you know, is not prepared, but if you would allow me to be your host at the hotel?"

Our luncheon proved lengthy, and afterwards my large friend would not let the Spaniard go. He insisted that we should drive out together to a café on the headland of the bay.

Don Louis wished to bank his money, but P. Rockingham waved the suggestion aside. "I've carried that ten thousand around these three months," he laughed. "Nothin's goin' to happen to it in just one day—sides, if you pay it in you'll only have to draw it out tomorrow to square the Jew."

In the end Don Louis remained with us till well after midnight,

and the last we saw of him was as he drove off, making the night hideous with the noise of his rickety car.

Our boat sailed at ten o'clock next morning. I was downstairs early, and having packed my things went to the office to settle my bill.

Lyckidopolous presented it with an oily smile; it was extortionate for such a place, and I paid it grudgingly, after having rectified a mistake in the addition. The Greek became voluble in his apologies as he rubbed his yellow hands.

I was walking away when he suddenly called after me. "Pardon, sir, I had forgotten—the lunch of yesterday—is it you who will pay for that or Mr. Budd?"

"Why—no," I said. "We were both the guests of Don Louis d'Ulloa."

He gave me a queer look. "Don Louis d'Ulloa?" he repeated. "You mistake, sir, he is abroad."

"Abroad?" I exclaimed. "But it was he who lunched with us yesterday!"

"No, no," he assured me volubly. "Don Louis is a fat man with a heavy beard, I know him well. He owns the big villa on the hill-side across the bay which is shut up; he is a wealthy man, and rarely comes to Cyprus."

My brows contracted. Then our friend of yesterday was a fraud—he had taken advantage of Don Louis's absence to show us over the villa. The caretaker must have been in his pay. My thoughts flew to the wine. I asked if the real Don Louis had a cellar in the town, and described the whereabouts of the one to which we had been taken.

The Greek shook his head. "Don Louis has no such bodega—the one you speak of has been empty for some years."

I left Lyckidopolous gaping and hurried out—the keys were in my pocket. I reached the lodge and let myself in. Seizing a heavy piece of wood from the cooper's shed I attacked the bung of the first cask I came to—I hammered it until it loosened and got it out. Quickly I inserted the rubber tubing just as I had seen the fake Don Louis do. I sucked hard for a second—a jet of liquid struck the roof of my mouth. I spat it out, it was cold water.

I tried some of the other casks; each one was the same—full to the bung with nothing more precious than water. I ran all the way back to the hotel. If anything was to be done it must be done quickly. The yarn about the Jew was obviously untrue. If we hurried we might catch our swindler at the bank.

P. Rockingham Budd was in his room packing when I burst in on him.

"I say," I cried, "I've got bad news for you."

"Thet so? Cough it up, son," he drawled. "Don't tell me the boat's delayed?"

"No, no, but that chap yesterday—he wasn't Don Louis d'Ulloa at all!"

"Say, now," he grinned, "have you only just tumbled to it?"

"Do you mean to say you knew?" I spluttered.

"Sure," he said quietly. "When a guy points out a picture of Charles V as his ancestor who fought under Alva, it soon puts me wise."

"But the wine," I exclaimed impatiently. "There isn't any, it's water."

"You don't say—I was wondering what was in them casks."

I grew desperate. "But damn it, man," I cried, "you've paid for it—ten thousand dollars cash."

Budd's wide smile spread over his broad mottled face. "You didn't happen to see that bird hunting around for any water marks on them greenbacks?" he asked.

"What?" I gasped, "they were——?"

"That's so," he nodded. "Guy I know turns 'em out by the hundred in a little joint way back of Satan's Alley in Noo York, makes 'em special for innercent travellers to hand out to birds like Don Louis. I guess he'll throw a fit when he does get to that bank!"

I sat down, breathless.

P. Rockingham Budd closed one eye in a solemn wink. "Great day we had yesterday," he grinned, "six-sixty bucks and a heap of fun. Say, friend, we'd better hurry or we'll miss our boat."

STORY XVII

HERE AGAIN IS SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO ADD, I HOPE, A LITTLE SPICE to this mixed pudding. It is a one-act play, and therefore an example from my attempts at story-telling in yet another medium.

Perhaps the word 'spice' is a little inadvised in this connection as the theme happens to be abortion; but anyone rash enough to expect a Rabelaisian *conte* will be disappointed. The necessity for abortion is never amusing and almost invariably a frightening and tragic matter. That I have here possibly succeeded in giving a farcical touch to an otherwise sordid little tragedy is my only excuse for printing this cynical and highly improbable playlet.

I should never have written *Thyroid* at all had it not been for my old friend, Bertie Van Thal. In many capacities he has been connected with books and plays and films for even longer than I have known him, which is long before I ever started to write seriously myself. After my early successes I met him at a party one night. He told me that he was seeking a curtain-raiser for a very famous actress. With his usual boundless enthusiasm he assured me that I was just the man to provide the very thing he wanted.

That his optimism was entirely misplaced was no fault of his whatever; but it was certainly infectious. Fully convinced that I was the world's coming playwright I went away and wrote this one-act play. But poor Bertie was quite shattered when he read it. In the tones of an indulgent father pained by his young, he told me that two subjects should always be avoided by any author who wishes to be well regarded by the British Public; the one is the White Slave Traffic, the other is Abortion.

Basically he was probably right; certainly, as far as the accepted literary conventions of the past are concerned. But I am inclined to believe that the British Public of to-day is prepared to regard both these subjects with a well-balanced detachment. We all know that the world is far from being the place we would like it to be, and that our laws are far from perfect, and therefore have no objection to seeing these facets of life portrayed in fiction, provided they are presented decently.

To my mind the fact that the girl in this playlet should have been tempted to get rid of an unwanted infant is by no means so evil a thing as the hideous tyranny exercised over his household by her 'Victorian' father. Young people of to-day may find it difficult to believe that such bigoted and tyrannical parents ever had any real existence, but had they been their present age at the beginning of this century they would have accepted such a portrait as by no means overdrawn.

The poetic justice of the finale still gives me a good laugh, which enables me to hope that you will also get one from it.

THYROID

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

CAST

FATHER (Mr. Cotton): *A man of sixty. Big, heavy build. Round, ruddy face. High, bold forehead. Brown hair. Walrus moustache. Round, staring eyes. Very slow and deliberate in speech and manner. Walks like a wooden soldier—or as though suffering from locomotor-ataxia. Dressed in pepper and salt suit, stiff collar, very small black bow tie.*

MOTHER (Mrs. Cotton): *A woman of fifty-five. Fat, untidy, good-natured, but obviously harassed by life. Talks rather fast. Rather common. Dressed in navy blue coat-frock piped with red and lace yoke, badly cut.*

WENDY COTTON (their Daughter): *A girl of twenty to twenty-one. Pretty, nice voice, a trifle above her family in manner and speech. Dressed nicely but inexpensively.*

ROBERT COTTON (their Son): *A young man of nineteen. Tall, nervous, rather long untidy dark hair, weak mouth. Dressed in worn grey flannels.*

CHARLES WILLMOTT: *A medical student, in love with Wendy, age twenty-four. Good clothes, smart appearance, pleasant manner and speech. Of a somewhat higher social level than his girl friend's family.*

SCENE

The living-room in the Cotton house in Balham.

TIME: *Four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in Winter.*

TO RIGHT OF STAGE: *A window in front of which is a table with an aspidistra plant, some old magazines, and a bottle of Thyroid tablets.*

AT RIGHT BACK: *A bureau desk and, near centre, a door to hall. (Telephone is in hall and cannot be seen.)*

IN RIGHT CENTRE: *An oak gate-legged table with four stiff-backed chairs. (Mother's chair is nearest footlights.)*

AT LEFT BACK: *An open fireplace in which a fire is burning and further left a bookcase full of old and battered volumes.*

IN LEFT CENTRE: *A large wooden stiff-backed armchair (Father's chair). It faces stage and is a little to the left of fire. Further left, a large sofa. Behind sofa, a small stool.*

ON WALLS: *Landseer engravings—'Monarch of the Glen', etc. Above fire-place an elaborate overmantel with mirrors and a quantity of cheap ornate china.*

NOTE: *Artistic licence has been used in the description of the properties of Thyroid. It is essential that the dangers of the drug should be stressed in order that the Censor may consent to the production of*

the play, without fear of the drug being used for illegal purposes. An overdose of many other drugs which are easily obtainable by the general public would have an equally drastic effect.

[The sitting-room in the Cotton house, Saturday afternoon, time four o'clock. It is raining. WENDY seated reading on sofa, MRS. COTTON seated knitting at table, ROBERT walking restlessly up and down—hands in pockets.]

WENDY: Oh, Robert—must you?

ROBERT: Must I what?

WENDY: Fidget so. Can't you sit down or something?

ROBERT (*surlily*): Oh, all right. (*Sits beside her on sofa with his long legs stretched out, contemplating his feet.*)

MOTHER: Why don't you practise your shorthand, dear?

ROBERT: I'm sick to death of shorthand.

MOTHER (*shocked*): Oh, Robert, how can you! And after your father paying all that money for you to take night classes.

ROBERT: I didn't ask him to, did I?

MOTHER: Robert!

ROBERT: Well?

MOTHER (*looking round nervously*): It's a good thing that your father's not at home to hear you. What he'd say I don't know. It's quite time you showed a little appreciation of all he's done for you and settled down to work.

ROBERT (*bitterly*): Work—I like that. What do you think I do all day, adding up columns of figures in that stuffy office. Surely a chap's got a right to spend his Saturday afternoons as he likes. Besides, father doesn't pay for it. He pinches the fees out of my miserable screw.

MOTHER: Robert! I will not have you say such things. It's only right and proper that you should pay your father back a little of all he's spent on your schooling now you've started to earn money yourself.

ROBERT: Well, he can't have it both ways. Out of the thirty bob a week I get from that old swindler Briggs I'm only allowed to keep ten shillings. On that, I'm supposed to dress, lunch, pay my fares, keep myself, and every other darn thing—while father takes the quid. I call that pretty mean, but what's he do then—goes and fixes these rotten night classes on me and I suppose I'll be expected to pay him back for them in twenty years' time. So what I've got to be grateful for, I'm hanged if I know. I've a jolly good mind to have it out with him.

WENDY: You wouldn't dare.

ROBERT: I'm not so sure about that.

MOTHER: You'll do no such thing, my boy. Remember your father's heart.

ROBERT: Do we ever get a chance to forget it?

MOTHER: Robert! that's most unkind.

ROBERT: No, it's not. But it isn't fair. Every time anybody wants to do anything in this house father's heart gets dragged in. I'm not

allowed to smoke, Wendy's not allowed out after ten o'clock at night, you're not allowed to have the wireless on when he's at home. And we mustn't say a word in protest—not a word, because of father's heart, father's heart, father's heart! It's the limit!

MOTHER (*replacing her knitting in bag and rising from table*): My boy, you know quite well that the doctor says the least excitement might be fatal to him, and he's been a good father to you children even if he is a little strict in his ways. It's only your good that he has at heart, so you must learn to give way to his wishes without complaining. And now I must make those girdle scones or they won't be done for tea. (*Exit.*)

[ROBERT *stands up and begins to walk moodily up and down the room again.*]

WENDY: What is the matter with you to-day, Robert?

ROBERT: I'm in the hell of a mess.

WENDY: Well, I can't lend you any more money—I'm broke myself.

ROBERT: Oh, it's not money this time. It's worse.

WENDY: What on earth have you done now?

ROBERT: Got the sack.

WENDY: Robert!

ROBERT: Jolly, isn't it? That old swine Briggs caught me trying to write a short story in the office. I wasn't quick enough to push it under the ledger.

WENDY: My dear, there will be a blinding row.

ROBERT: Don't I know it.

WENDY: Better tell father yourself before he has a chance to see Briggs.

ROBERT: I suppose so—but, by Jove, it needs some pluck.

WENDY: It will be worse if he finds out. Besides, after all, what can he do? He can't beat you.

ROBERT: No, but sometimes I wish he would. I think I'd rather take a licking than stand there while he stares at me with those round eyes of his. It makes me go cold all over.

WENDY: Yes. It's not even what he says so much, it's just the way he looks at you. We are idiots to be so scared of him at our age, but I suppose it's habit. Every time there is a row I make up my mind to face it out, but somehow I just can't. I'm terrified of him.

ROBERT (*fiercely*): God, how I hate that man! I wish he'd have his damned heart attack and die.

WENDY (*in feeble protest*): Oh, Robert, you mustn't say that sort of thing.

ROBERT: I mean it. Honestly, Wendy. I know it's wrong, and all that, but I do—and it's his fault. He's got no right to make our lives a misery just because he's our father. Think how different everything would be if he did pass out.

WENDY: Well, he won't. He's far too careful of himself, so it's no good thinking about it.

ROBERT: If only I'd got some money I'd clear out. You know what it's like after a row—the house will be like a morgue for a fort-

night. Everybody going about on tiptoe with that awful atmosphere of disapproval: "Hush! Hush! Robert's been a naughty boy and he mustn't be allowed to forget it." You know the sort of thing.

WENDY (*with sudden bitterness*): Well, what's a fortnight? You don't know what real trouble is.

ROBERT (*turning and looking at her quickly*): Hullo! you in trouble, too?

[*A bell rings in the hall.*]

WENDY: That's the front door. I'll go. (*Exit.*)

[*Re-enter WENDY with CHARLES WILLMOTT.*]

CHARLES: Afternoon, Robert. How are you?

ROBERT: Rotten. I've lost my job.

CHARLES: I say! Does the old man know?

ROBERT: Not yet, so for the lord's sake don't say anything.

CHARLES (*leading WENDY to sofa, where both sit down*): Trust me, not a word. (*To WENDY*): And how's the dream girl?

WENDY: Not too good, but better for seeing her Bonnie Prince Charlie.

ROBERT (*staring moodily out of window*): Tweet, tweet!

WENDY: Shut up, Robert.

[*ROBERT takes no notice. CHARLES looks quickly at WENDY, then at ROBERT's back, and then again at WENDY.*]

CHARLES: Your father's not in, is he?

WENDY: No.

CHARLES: That's good.

WENDY: He will be soon, though, and you know how it is. I can't ask you to stay to tea because he says strangers excite him.

CHARLES (*looking impatiently at ROBERT's back*): No—I know. I only dropped in just to—well, to see you for a minute and bring you these. (*Produces box of chocolates.*)

WENDY (*taking box and opening it*): Oh, you darling—my favourite ones. (*Offers box.*)

CHARLES: No, thanks, dear.

WENDY: Robert?

ROBERT (*still gazing out of window*): What?

WENDY: Chocolate?

ROBERT: Thanks. (*CHARLES carries box over to him.*) Thanks, old chap. (*Takes one and turns back towards window.* CHARLES, *standing beside him, picks up the bottle of Thyroid from the window table.*)

CHARLES (*reading bottle*): "One grain equals five grains desiccated." Who's taking Thyroid?

WENDY: Mother. It's her latest stunt for reducing.

ROBERT (*chanting, with his back still turned*): And, my dear, I lost seven pounds in a fortnight. I can even eat potatoes now.

CHARLES (*replacing bottle*): Tricky stuff to monkey with. But I suppose it's all right if you haven't got a heart. (*Walks back to WENDY.*)

ROBERT (*turning slowly round*): Why?

CHARLES: Thyroid's like poison for anyone with a heart. One

dose would be enough to bring on an attack—kill them stone dead.

ROBERT (*turning back to window*): Well, mother's heart's all right.

[*For half a minute there is silence while CHARLES and*

WENDY *stare at ROBERT's back.*]

WENDY (*impatiently*): Robert, dear, do run away. Father will be coming in and then Charles will have to go. You might leave us alone for ten minutes.

ROBERT: Oh, all right. I'll go and gloom upstairs.

WENDY (*handing him a two-shilling novel in a brown-paper cover*): You'd better take this. It's another shocker, isn't it? There will be an awful row if father catches you reading it.

ROBERT (*taking book*): Oh, he won't spot it with the brown-paper cover on. (*Exit.*)

CHARLES (*quickly, as door closes*): Any—any news?

WENDY: No, darling. Just the same. (*For a moment they sit side by side in miserable silence.*)

WENDY: Oh, Charles, what are we going to do? I'm frightened.

CHARLES (*miserably*): Darling, what can you expect? These things don't come right of themselves. If only you'd be sensible and take the medicine that I got for you.

WENDY: It's no good, Charles—I won't. It's wrong, and it's dangerous—you know it is.

CHARLES: All drugs are dangerous if you don't understand their use—but I do understand about this. I'm not qualified yet, it's true, but I shall be in a year, and to make quite certain I asked one of the doctors at the hospital. Surely you know, darling, that I wouldn't dream of asking you to take this stuff if there were any real risk.

WENDY: Oh, what's the good of going over it all again? If it's strong enough to do the trick it must be dangerous. If it's not, then it only means that I shall make myself beastly ill and perhaps injure the child, all for nothing.

CHARLES (*wearily*): There you are—injure the child—you are thinking about the child already. That's Dame Nature getting busy, just like a wicked old woman. Directly a girl is old enough she sets the trap, baits it with every inducement, prods her in the back and the man, too. Then when they lose their heads for ten minutes, Dame Nature just laughs and walks away. She's done her job of providing another healthy girl with a baby—and she doesn't give a cuss for the consequences. But if there is any question of using science to defeat her, she comes rushing back, stirs up the girl's subconscious instinct until it overrules her common-sense, and she flatly refuses even to help herself out of the trouble she's in.

WENDY: Oh, well, there's ages to go yet, something may happen.

CHARLES: There you are—that's another of old Dame Nature's favourite tricks. Lulling you into a false sense of security. "Don't worry, my dear," she says. "It will be all right, you aren't really going to have a baby—something will happen to prevent it—next week or next month." Though why it should with a healthy girl, Lord in heaven knows. Then one fine day you'll wake up to the fac

that it's too jolly late to do anything at all, and that devilish old woman will go off with a leer to work the same trick on some other poor girl. We get dozens of them every week at the hospital. You're not normal at the present time, Wendy, darling—no woman is when she's that way. You don't realize your own position as well as I do.

WENDY: Don't I?—that's all you know. I was wretchedly ill every morning this week, and I simply can't sleep at night for thinking about it. I can't get it out of my mind for two seconds.

CHARLES (*taking her in his arms*): You poor darling. I know just how it must be, and there's not a moment of the day when I'm not thinking about you—but I do wish you would be brave and make an effort with this stuff.

WENDY: I can't, Charles. I've been reading the cases in the papers. You've no idea how many women die from doing that sort of thing, and if we were found out they would put us both in prison. It's not right to do it—it can't be. If it were, the law would be altered and doctors would be allowed to do it properly in cases where the girl was not married.

CHARLES: All right, darling. If you feel so strongly about it.

WENDY: Can't we possibly get married?

CHARLES: Well, we can, but you know all about Aunt Edith's will. If I marry before I'm twenty-five, that five thousand that she left me goes slap down the drain. We've only got just over a year to wait—and I do think we'd be absolutely mad not to hang on till then.

WENDY: Oh, I know it's an awful lot of money—but surely this is more important.

CHARLES: Now, listen, sweetheart. What good is it going to do? If we had got married before this happened, that would have been different. I wouldn't grudge the money, but as it is we are not even engaged officially. We can't get married under a couple of months without exciting comment, and then we'll have the baby on the mat before we know where we are, so you'd have to face a scandal, anyhow. Surely it's more sensible to try to get out of this mess—get engaged as soon as you like, and we'll be married on my twenty-fifth birthday with everything all clear in front of us, and five thousand pounds in our pocket.

WENDY: I suppose you're right—but I won't take that stuff—I'm frightened, Charles. I'm sure it's dangerous.

CHARLES (*producing a flat flask bottle from his hip pocket*): All right, we won't talk about the medicine any more, but I want you to try this.

WENDY (*suspiciously*): What is it?

CHARLES: Good old-fashioned gin.

WENDY: You know I loathe the taste of gin.

CHARLES: Yes. That's why I prepared this specially. It is about one-third Crème-de-Menthe.

WENDY: It sounds horrible.

CHARLES: It's not. It's just like a Stinger cocktail, and you know you love Crème de Menthe.

WENDY (*dubiously, taking bottle*): What am I to do with it?

CHARLES: Heat it up when you go to bed to-night and add the same quantity of boiling water, then drink it as hot as you can.

WENDY: What! All of it!

CHARLES: Yes.

WENDY: I shall be tight.

CHARLES: That's just what I want—but it won't matter as you are going straight to bed.

WENDY: Do you really think it will do any good?

CHARLES: I can't say for certain, but I hope so.

WENDY: It will only make me sick.

CHARLES: Now, darling, do be different. Isn't it worth the risk of being a little ill if there is a chance of getting out of this wretched mess?

WENDY: All right, darling. Kiss me.

[They embrace and break away as door opens. Enter

FATHER, holding himself very upright and walking with stiff, jerky steps.]

WENDY (*nervously, as she slips bottle behind cushions on sofa*):
Hullo, father. You know Charles Willmott, don't you?

FATHER (*stiffly*): Good afternoon.

CHARLES (*nervously*): Good afternoon, sir. It's a lovely day, isn't it?

FATHER (*glancing at grey window*): Lovely for people who sell mackintoshes, perhaps.

CHARLES: Ha! Ha! Well, yes—I meant if only it would clear up—but I must be getting along.

WENDY: Will you call for me later?

CHARLES: Yes, rather. (*Exit with WENDY.*)

[FATHER turns slowly looking round room, he sees chocolates on sofa, walks over, picks up the box and puts one in his mouth. He munches slowly, then takes a handful and slips them in his pocket. Returns box to sofa and walks stiffly to straight-backed chair on left of fire, into which he lowers himself carefully.]

Re-enter WENDY.

FATHER: What was that bottle which you were holding when I came in?

WENDY (*laughing nervously*): Oh—er—that was scent.

FATHER: Where did you get it?

WENDY: Charles Willmott gave it to me.

FATHER: You know that I do not approve of your receiving presents from young men.

WENDY: Oh, father, surely!

FATHER: Bring it to me.

WENDY: But, father!

FATHER: You heard what I said.

[WENDY produces bottle and with some hesitation walks over and gives it to him. He takes it without a word, pulls out the cork and sniffs at the contents. He then sits up straighter than ever, his eyes round and staring. He looks at her for a full minute without speaking, then.]

FATHER (*very softly*): You have lied to me.

WENDY: No, father—well—well—yes.

FATHER: You have lied to me.

WENDY (*in a whisper*): Yes, father.

FATHER: What is in this bottle?

WENDY: Crème de Menthe, father.

FATHER: Liquor! Liquor in my house. (*He stares at her for another half a minute in silence, then adds*): You shameless girl! Alcohol! What will your mother say when she learns that her daughter has brought liquor into a God-fearing home?

WENDY (*pleading*): Oh, father, it's for medicine, really. Charles brought it because I can't sleep at night. Just a little can't do any harm.

FATHER: What! You dare to defend yourself?

WENDY (*desperately*): Why shouldn't I have it? I'm not a child.

FATHER (*standing up with a jerk*): My daughter defies me. (*Suddenly sits down again and leans back with closed eyes—begins to pant*): Fetch—fetch your mother.

[WENDY, with a little gesture of despair, runs out of room.

Re-enters again with MRS. COTTON, both running.]

MOTHER (*to FATHER*): What is it, dear? What is it? (*to WENDY*): Oh, you wicked girl. What have you done to bring on one of your father's attacks?

FATHER (*now recovered*): No. By the mercy of Providence I have escaped, but it was near—very near.

MOTHER: What has she done? Tell me, Albert?

FATHER: I cannot . . . I am too ashamed.

MOTHER: Tell me, dear, you'll feel better if you do.

FATHER: I cannot—and yet, it is only right that you should know. (*Sighs heavily*.)

MOTHER: What has she done, dear?

FATHER: How I wish that I could spare you.

MOTHER: Don't think of me, Albert.

FATHER (*after an impressive pause*): Our daughter has brought liquor into our home.

MOTHER: Wendy!

WENDY: Oh, mother, it was only a tiny bottle of Crème de Menthe. Charles gave it to me just to take before I go to bed because I'm not sleeping very well.

MOTHER: But *alcohol*, Wendy! How could you?

WENDY: I'm sorry if I've upset father, but really it's not as terrible as all that.

FATHER: There! You hear her? Shameless! Shameless! And in a deceitful attempt to hide her wickedness she told me a deliberate lie. She said that this Devil's Poison was scent.

MOTHER: Oh, Wendy!

WENDY: What was I to do? . . . I knew it would upset father if I told him the truth.

FATHER: That is no excuse.

[Enter ROBERT. They all stare at him in silence. He

looks guiltily away, fearing that his own trouble has come to light, and slinks over to the window, where he stands fidgeting nervously. After a moment:]

ROBERT (*with sullen defiance*): Oh, well! Say something, somebody.

FATHER: Are you aware, Robert, of what your sister has done?

ROBERT: Wendy! No—I thought—well, I was only wondering what you were all looking so glum about.

FATHER (*to WENDY*): To-morrow will be Sunday. After evening church I will speak to you in my study.

WENDY: Yes, father.

MOTHER (*to WENDY*): Now run and get the tea, dear. It's all ready in the kitchen.

[Exit WENDY, dabbing her eyes. FATHER puts flask of Crème de Menthe in his pocket. ROBERT goes to sofa and sits down to read his paper-covered thriller.]

FATHER: Reading again, Robert?

ROBERT: Yes, father.

FATHER: What an extraordinary boy you are. You have an excellent home and yet you are hardly ever in it, except to read and sleep. When you do honour us with your presence you never deign to enter into conversation with your parents, but sit in a corner reading a book. Really, I think you look upon your home as though it were an hotel.

ROBERT: Oh, no, father.

FATHER: I say that you do. What book are you reading now?

ROBERT (*nervously*): Just—er—a book from the library.

FATHER: And who is the author?

ROBERT: Well, it's—er—an Edgar Wallace.

FATHER: What! After I have told you that I do not approve of your reading such vile trash.

ROBERT: Father—I'm sick of Dickens.

FATHER: That is no excuse. There are others. Thackeray, Scott, Bulwer-Lytton, Trollope, Meredith, all suitable reading for a boy of your years.

ROBERT (*sullenly*): I like something exciting, father.

FATHER: I will not have you read such pernicious rubbish.

ROBERT: Well, I'll get one of the old dry ones, next time.

FATHER: If that is your view of literature, my boy, you need a lesson. Such books as you are reading now are only fit to be burnt. Put that book on the fire.

ROBERT (*standing up*): But it's a library book.

FATHER: Do as I tell you.

ROBERT: I can't—I'd have to pay for it.

FATHER: I trust the fine will prove a lesson to you.

ROBERT: But I've just got to the exciting part. Do let me finish it.

FATHER: You heard what I said.

ROBERT (*with sudden hostility*): Why should I?

FATHER (*rising slowly to his feet*): Robert!

MOTHER (*quickly, as WENDY enters with tea-tray*): Robert, how can you? Think of your father's heart.

ROBERT (*with a sudden laugh*): Father's heart! All right—I will.

[*Throws the book violently into fire and walks quickly over to the window. WENDY sets down tea-tray on table. She and MOTHER lay table. The tray with four cups remains in front of MOTHER, who is facing the stage, so that cups are hidden from audience. MOTHER pours out tea. ROBERT is fingering the Thyroid bottle in window.*]

FATHER: I think I will go round and see if Mr. Briggs is in, after tea. It is some time since I have seen him.

[*ROBERT goes tense at window.*]

MOTHER: Are you sure that it's not too far for you, dear?

FATHER: A few minutes' walk will do me good.

[*ROBERT unscrews top of bottle and shakes four or five tabloids into his hand.*]

MOTHER: I think I had better come with you, Albert.

FATHER: Yes, that would be best. I shall be interested to hear if Robert is giving satisfaction to his employer.

[*ROBERT screws on the top of bottle, retaining tabloids in the palm of his hand. He moves to front centre of stage on left of MOTHER and takes cup of tea from her. He is facing audience, with his MOTHER, the tea-table, and WENDY to his immediate left rear, and his FATHER some distance away in chair by fire at his right rear. The tea-cup is hidden from all three; he shoots tablets of Thyroid into it and is about to take it over to his father when:*]

MOTHER: Oh, what am I doing. That tea is much too strong for your father. (*Stretches out left hand and takes cup back before ROBERT can do anything. Places cup on tray hidden from audience, and adds water.*)

[*The telephone rings in hall.*]

MOTHER: See who it is, Robert.

ROBERT (*anxiously eyeing cup*): You go, Wendy.

[*WENDY is busy spreading jam very thickly on a piece of bread-and-butter.*]

FATHER (*as telephone continues to ring*): You heard your mother. Wendy is making my sandwiches.

ROBERT (*with a last glance at cup*): All right, father. (*Exit quickly.*)

WENDY (*taking sandwiches bursting with jam over to her FATHER*): Here you are, father.

FATHER: Thank you—and my table.

[*WENDY places a small table beside him as ROBERT re-enters.*]

ROBERT: It's for you, Mother. Mrs. Snelling wants to speak to you.

MOTHER: All right, dear. I'm coming. (*Exit.*)

FATHER: My tea, please.

WENDY (*returning to table*): Which one is it—oh, this looks the weakest. (*Picks up cup and takes it to FATHER.*)

[ROBERT follows her movements anxiously with his eyes as he carries over the sugar.]

FATHER (takes cup and helps himself to four lumps of sugar): Thank you. (Begins to munch jam sandwich slowly.)

WENDY (handing another cup to ROBERT): Here's yours, Robert.

ROBERT (looking at it dubiously): Er—thanks. (They sit down to table. Re-enter MOTHER.)

MOTHER: Mrs. Snelling wants us all to go over to cold supper to-morrow night.

FATHER: I hope that you have not accepted.

MOTHER: Well, dear, I did. You know you like Mr. Snelling, Albert.

FATHER: You have forgotten that I wish to speak to Wendy after church.

WENDY: Oh, father, can't you do it to-night, and get it over.

FATHER: This is not a matter which can be 'got over'. I wish for time to consider how best to deal with your outrageous behaviour.

MOTHER: All right, dear. I'll put Mrs. Snelling off.

WENDY (handing bread-and-butter): Robert?

ROBERT: No, thanks. I don't want any.

MOTHER: Well, drink up your tea, dear. It will get cold.

ROBERT (tasting tea gingerly): I don't think I like it. It tastes rather queer.

MOTHER: Nonsense, dear. It's a little different, but it's a new kind I'm trying. The manager at Sainsbury's gave me a free sample.

FATHER: I thought it different, but it is very good.

WENDY: I don't like it as much as the one we always have.

ROBERT (setting cup down): I don't like it at all.

MOTHER: Don't be silly, Robert. I think it's very nice. I like that rather unusual flavour.

ROBERT: I don't think I will finish mine.

FATHER: Robert, you will finish your tea at once.

ROBERT: But, father, I don't really feel like tea to-day.

FATHER: I cannot sit here and see things that I have paid for wasted.

ROBERT: Mother said it was a free sample.

FATHER: You heard what I said.

ROBERT (reluctantly): All right, father. (Slowly drinks tea in little gulps.)

FATHER (rising): If you are ready, my dear, we will walk round to Mr. and Mrs. Briggs.

MOTHER (hastily bolting her tea and stuffing the remains of a piece of bread-and-butter into her mouth): Yes, Albert.

FATHER (to WENDY and ROBERT): Neither of you will leave the house this evening—I am greatly displeased with you both.

[Exit FATHER and MOTHER.]

ROBERT (angrily): Can you beat it—and I was going to the dirt track with Reggie Turner.

WENDY (miserably): I know—and Charles was going to take me to the pictures. I suppose he won't even be allowed in the house any more after this.

ROBERT: Why, what's he done—and what's the old man wild with you about?

WENDY: Charles brought me a flask of Crème de Menthe, and father found out.

ROBERT: Phew!—drink. My goodness, you'll catch it. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned you out in the street for that.

WENDY: He won't as long as I've got a job. He wouldn't be able to get his fifteen shillings a week out of me if he did.

ROBERT: I wonder he didn't have an attack.

WENDY: He very nearly did.

ROBERT: Wendy, did you think that tea tasted queer?

WENDY: Yes. I didn't like it a bit.

ROBERT: Well, that's a comfort.

WENDY: What on earth do you mean?

ROBERT: Oh, nothing—only—well, I'm glad we both felt the same about it.

WENDY: You were an awful fool to say anything. If you had drunk a little when mother spoke to you, you could have left the rest—she probably wouldn't have noticed.

ROBERT (*uneasily*): Yes, I wish I'd done that. (*He walks over to window and WENDY settles down to read.*)

ROBERT (*suddenly*): How long do you think they'll be at old Briggs?

WENDY: How should I know? It all depends if the Briggs are at home. Even if they are, father may come rushing back directly he hears that you've got the push.

ROBERT: Good Lord, yes. I'd forgotten about that.

WENDY: I wish I could forget as quickly about the Crème de Menthe.

[ROBERT paces restlessly up and down. After a minute he comes to a halt in front of WENDY.]

ROBERT: I say, Wendy. Are you feeling all right?

WENDY: Yes. Why?

ROBERT: I'm not—I'm feeling rotten.

WENDY: It's an attack of the funk, I expect. I'm sorry I reminded you about old Briggs.

ROBERT: No, it's not that.

WENDY: What is it then? You *are* looking white.

ROBERT (*scared*): Am I? Oh, Lord!

WENDY: Have you got a pain?

ROBERT: Yes. No, not exactly. I wonder if I'd better make myself sick.

WENDY: Whatever for?

ROBERT: I don't know. Perhaps I've eaten something that doesn't agree with me.

WENDY: You couldn't have. You didn't eat anything for tea.

ROBERT (*slowly*): No—but—but it might have been the tea.

WENDY: It couldn't be—we all had it.

ROBERT: Yes, I know—but . . .

WENDY: But, what?

ROBERT: Oh, nothing.

WENDY: Sit down and read your book. If you think of something else it will go off.

ROBERT: I can't. You know father made me burn the blasted thing. Just when I'd got to the part where they were going to pour vitriol over the girl's face, too.

WENDY: Well, start another.

ROBERT: Yes, that's an idea. (*Goes to bookcase behind sofa and takes out worn volume.*) Wonder if I can possibly stand dear old Ouida again. (*Sits down beside WENDY on sofa, flicks over a few pages, then shuts up the book. Remains staring at his feet for a moment, then gets up and goes over to window. Picks up Thyroid bottle and carefully reads label.*)

ROBERT: "One grain equals five grains desiccated." Now, whatever does that mean? It's not sense.

WENDY (*sententiously*): Children should never play with dangerous drugs or they may do themselves great harm. Little boys have died through being inquisitive about the things in mother's cupboard.

ROBERT (*savagely, as he bangs down bottle*): Shut up, can't you!

WENDY: Robert!

ROBERT: I'm sorry. (*Turns back to window.*)

[*A bell rings in the hall.*]

ROBERT (*swinging round*): Who's that?

WENDY: I don't know—it's the front door.

ROBERT: They can't have got back already.

WENDY: Of course not, and anyway father would use his key.

ROBERT: But if he were taken ill?

WENDY: Why should he be?

ROBERT: Oh, I don't know—anyhow, you go.

WENDY: Robert, what is the matter with you to-day?

ROBERT: Nothing—just worried, that's all. (*Exit, reluctantly.*)

[*Re-enter ROBERT, holding letter.*]

ROBERT: It was only the post—and a William at that. (*Places letter on bureau and walks to window, begins to whistle.*)

WENDY: Feeling all right again?

ROBERT (*stopping abruptly*): Yes—that is, no worse, anyhow.

[*The front door-bell rings again.*]

ROBERT: Well, that can't be the post. Do you think it's them? Perhaps father forgot to take his key.

WENDY: What about it if he did? You've got to go through it some time—don't be a coward.

[*The bell rings again.*]

ROBERT (*nervously*): You go, Wendy?

WENDY: Why should I? I wish you would let me read in peace.

ROBERT: It's your turn. Wendy—please.

WENDY: Oh, all right. (*Exit, taking tea-tray with her.*)

[*ROBERT picks up the Thyroid bottle again and mops his face with his handkerchief. Then he watches the door, listening intently.*]

[*Enter CHARLES.*]

ROBERT (*with relief*): Oh, it's you!

CHARLES: Yes. I hear there has been a row, and Wendy is not allowed to come out.

ROBERT (*quickly*): Yes. Where is she?

CHARLES: In the kitchen, I think.

ROBERT (*holding up bottle*): Look here. This Thyroid stuff we were talking about this afternoon. How long does it take to work?

CHARLES (*seating himself comfortably on sofa*): It all depends.

ROBERT: What on?

CHARLES: All sorts of things. The dose. The state of health of the person who takes it. It's a very dangerous drug, and should never be taken except by doctor's orders.

ROBERT: Would it—would it kill anybody who hadn't got a heart?

CHARLES: It might, if they took enough.

ROBERT: Oh, hell!

CHARLES: Why, what's the matter? You haven't been experimenting on yourself, have you?

ROBERT: Me? No, oh no. I was just thinking out a story about it, and that upsets my plot. What—what are the symptoms if anybody takes an overdose?

CHARLES: Headaches, dizziness, generally feeling rotten. Rather as if you were tight.

ROBERT (*weakly*): Thanks. (*Sits down quickly.*)

[*Enter WENDY.*]

CHARLES: It is a shame about to-night.

WENDY: I'm so sorry, dear. Anyhow, there is one good thing. I shan't have to make myself sick on Crème de Menthe. Father pinched the bottle.

ROBERT (*looking up*): Why should you have to make yourself sick on it, anyway?

WENDY (*quickly*): Oh, I was only joking.

CHARLES (*slowly*): Look here, can't you get that bottle back?

WENDY: Not unless I can find it in the dustbin. I expect that's where father will put it.

[*The telephone rings.*]

ROBERT (*starting*): Who the devil's that?

WENDY: Mr. Briggs, perhaps, to say that father's had an attack when he told him about your getting the sack.

ROBERT (*miserably*): Oh, Wendy, don't. (*Stands irresolute near door.*)

WENDY (*standing up*): All right, you needn't worry. I'll go.

[*Exit WENDY. ROBERT sits down again with his head between his hands.*]

CHARLES: What is the matter with you, Robert?

ROBERT (*mopping his face*): Oh, I don't know.

[*Re-enter WENDY.*]

WENDY: It was father.

ROBERT: What—what did he say?

WENDY: That you are to go round to the Briggs at once.

ROBERT (*springing to his feet*): Has he—has he had an attack?

WENDY: No.

ROBERT: Does he—know about me?

WENDY: No, it's not that, it's . . .

ROBERT: I know—he's going to have me on the mat in front of old Briggs.

WENDY: No. It's mother, she's been taken ill. He wants you to help him get her home.

ROBERT (*aghast*): Mother!

WENDY: Yes, she's fainted or something, poor dear. Why, Robert, you're as white as a sheet.

ROBERT: Good God! How ghastly! (*Rushes from room.*)

CHARLES: What is the matter with him to-day?

WENDY: I don't know. He's worried about this row that he is in for with father, I suppose, but I'm in for something much worse.

CHARLES (*sitting down by her on sofa and taking her by the hand*): My poor little dream girl. Was he very angry?

WENDY: Oh, Charles, he was beastly. You should have seen the way he looked at me. That awful stony stare of his makes me want to scream. I'm just terrified.

CHARLES (*putting his arms round her*): Never mind, darling. I wish he hadn't got that bottle, though.

WENDY: Oh, what's that matter? I don't suppose it would have done any good, anyhow, but there will be a worse row than ever if he finds you here. You had better go, dear, before they get back.

CHARLES: What! And leave you on your own? Not likely. I shall stay and take the blame. He can say what he darn well likes to me. I don't care.

WENDY: It wouldn't do any good, darling, he'll only turn you out—and I'm afraid you will never be allowed in the house again, anyhow.

CHARLES: Well, that's not much loss. We can meet outside, as usual.

WENDY (*shaking her head*): Not until this has blown over, dear. I expect he will make me stay in every evening for a month, at least. It's going to be too ghastly.

CHARLES (*standing up*): All right—that settles it. I won't let you stay in this rotten house another day. We'll get married and chance it.

WENDY (*rising and putting her hands on his shoulders*): Do you really mean that, Charles?

CHARLES: I do. We'll get married right away.

WENDY: Oh, darling—I do love you.

CHARLES (*kissing her hands*): My dream girl.

WENDY: But it's awful to lose all that money. It's a fortune.

CHARLES: Never mind. I'll get a practice, somehow. After all, happiness does come first, and my father will help us a bit, I'm sure.

[WENDY *sways, puts her hand to her head and sits down suddenly.*]

CHARLES: What is it, darling?

WENDY: Nothing. I just feel a little faint. It's happiness, I think, and relief. Are you sure you won't regret this afterwards? I should hate that.

CHARLES: Of course not. We are just going to forget from now on that there ever was any Aunt Edith, and that she ever left me a legacy. If she hadn't we should have fallen in love just the same, and had just as many difficulties to face, with no prospect of the money. We shall be together, and that's everything.

WENDY: Oh, Charles, you don't know what it will mean to me to get out of this house. I hate it.

[*A door bangs, off.*]

CHARLES: Is that them, back already?

WENDY: Yes. The Briggs only live round the corner. Charles, you had better go.

CHARLES: Just a minute, darling. Listen. This is what we'll do. Pack everything that you can to-night, then be downstairs at the front door early to-morrow morning, say, at six o'clock, before they are up. Can you manage that?

WENDY: Yes, darling.

CHARLES: I'll be waiting for you, and I know a nice quiet boarding-house in Bayswater that you can stay in for the next week or two, while the licence is going through. We will be married as soon as we possibly can, and settle down in some place where we don't know a soul—then you can have the baby in peace, without any worry or scandal.

WENDY (*leaning back on sofa and closing her eyes*): It will be rotten for mother.

CHARLES: Well, I'm afraid we can't help that. I say, are you feeling all right, darling?

WENDY (*slowly*): Yes—but it's all so marvellous—I'm a bit over-come, that's all.

[*Enter ROBERT suddenly.*]

ROBERT: Well, thank goodness it's all right!

WENDY: What—mother? You've got her back, then?

ROBERT (*mopping his face*): Yes, we've taken her upstairs.

CHARLES: What happened? Is there anything I can do?

ROBERT (*cheerfully*): No, she just did a faint, that's all. She has once or twice lately—she does too much. It's a rotten shame that father makes her run this house on her own at her age. He could well afford a skivvy to help her.

WENDY (*slowly*): What—what about your job? Has Briggs told father?

ROBERT (*vaguely*): Job—oh, yes, I'd forgotten. That's all right, too. Old Briggs took me aside and said he would give me another chance for father's sake. The old slave-driver knows that he couldn't get anybody else to do the work for the same money.

WENDY (*holding her head*): Robert, you are casual about it. I—I think it's an awful piece of luck.

ROBERT: Well—I was worrying about something else—er—mother, I mean. I say—you're looking pretty dicky..

WENDY: I shall be all right in a minute. Charles, dear, I think you had better go. Father may come in. There's no point now in having a scene.

ROBERT: You needn't worry about father. He's gone to his study and you know he never budges out until it's time to feed.

[WENDY *leans back and closes her eyes again.*]

CHARLES: What is the matter, Wendy? I'm sure you're feeling ill.

WENDY (*panting slightly*): I—I don't know. I've got an awful buzzing in the head. Oh, I feel rotten.

CHARLES: All this trouble has upset you, I expect.

[ROBERT *looks furtively in the direction of the Thyroid bottle and then at WENDY.*]

WENDY: Charles?

CHARLES: Yes, darling?

WENDY: I don't know what's the matter with me. I—I feel just as though I were tight.

[CHARLES *takes her wrist to feel her pulse. ROBERT gives them another furtive look and after a minute slinks towards the door.*]

ROBERT: Well, I think I'll leave you two—go up to my room.

CHARLES (*dropping WENDY's wrist and standing up*): Wait a minute, young man—you stay here.

ROBERT (*nervously*): Why?

CHARLES (*walking over to him*): Look here, Robert, why were you so anxious to know all about Thyroid just now?

ROBERT (*drawing away*): I told you. I was thinking out a story.

CHARLES (*gripping him by the lapels of his coat*): That's a lie, and you know it.

ROBERT: It's not.

CHARLES: It is. Wendy is suffering from Thyroid poisoning.

ROBERT (*truculently*): How do you know?

CHARLES: Because it's my job.

ROBERT: You're not a doctor yet.

CHARLES: No, and I'm not a fool, either. Wendy's got all the symptoms—you're full of curious questions about it, and there's the drug on the table.

WENDY (*doubling up in pain*): Oh, Charles—I do feel so ill.

CHARLES (*turning his head sharply while he still keeps his hold on ROBERT*): Wendy—darling—tell me, did you take it yourself? How much did you take?

WENDY: Oh, Charles—I don't know. "I didn't take it, but I—I feel ghastly. My—my head's simply swimming.

CHARLES (*angrily*): Now, then, Robert. I knew you'd been monkeying with it.

ROBERT: I didn't give it her.

CHARLES (*shaking him roughly*): Stop lying, you young fool. Don't you understand that her life may be in danger?

ROBERT: I didn't give it her, I tell you.

CHARLES: Yes, you did. How much did you give her? Tell me at once.

ROBERT: I—I didn't. I swear I didn't.

WENDY (*now writhing on sofa*): Charles—oh, please get—get a doctor. I—I've got awful pains—right—right through me.

CHARLES (*to ROBERT fiercely*): You know what happened. If you don't tell me I'll get the police.

ROBERT: No—Charles. No, don't do that.

CHARLES: I will. They'll make you talk.

ROBERT (*gasping*): It was all a mistake. I meant to try it on myself.

CHARLES: You fool!

ROBERT: The tea cups got mixed up.

CHARLES: Never mind about that. How much did you put in?

ROBERT: Five of them.

CHARLES (*suddenly relaxing and letting go of ROBERT*): Thank God it wasn't more.

WENDY: Oh, Charles, tell me that I'll be all right—that I won't die.

CHARLES (*going over to her*): You won't, darling. If you had been going to die you would be dead by now.

WENDY: I—I've got awful—shooting pains.

CHARLES (*taking her hand*): Listen, darling, you must go to bed at once . . . while I get a doctor.

WENDY (*rising with CHARLES's help*): Oh—it's agony. Will he—will he be able to give me something?

CHARLES: I'm afraid you are in for a rotten time for the next few hours—but there's one thing. It won't be necessary for us to marry now until this time next year.

WENDY (*standing, supported by CHARLES*): Darling—you don't mean . . . ?

CHARLES: Yes, I do. That's one of the curious effects of an overdose of Thyroid—but in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it kills you instead.

WENDY: Then—oh, my dear—we'll get the five thousand, after all.

CHARLES: I wouldn't have taken the risk of giving you Thyroid for fifty thousand—and the moment you're well enough you're going to leave this house, just the same.

ROBERT: What the devil are you two talking about?

[*The door is suddenly burst open. Enter FATHER, clutching Crème de Menthe bottle—two-thirds empty—in one hand.*]

FATHER (*glaring at CHARLES and WENDY*): What—what was in his bottle? (*Shudders and leans against door.*)

CHARLES (*lowering WENDY to sofa*): Good God—you haven't drunk it?

FATHER: Ai—Ai—Ai have. What was in that Crème de Menthe?

WENDY (*horrified*): But, father, it was liquor!

CHARLES (*aghast*): And I put Urgot—in it. Urgot of Rye for Wendy.

ROBERT: Oh, Lord! That's done it! Think of father's heart.

[*FATHER twitches, shuts his eyes suddenly, gasps, and falls forward dead.*]

CURTAIN.

STORY XVIII

THIS IS A GOOD LITTLE STORY; BUT HOW FANTASTIC IT SEEMS THAT we had already been at war with Germany for some months when it was written. The proof that it is not unduly far-fetched is that it was accepted and published by one of our great National newspapers; and the two things which in peace or war any such organization is not prepared to do is to furnish readers with material which will enable them to say it is behind the times or being made a fool of.

The Editor knew; and innumerable other people knew, that enemy aliens were still holding key positions in our war industries with liberty to move about pretty well as they liked. One is entitled to wonder what the Minister responsible for our security thought his job entailed, and why certain crack-brained M.P.s still raise their voices in an imbecile endeavour to make the job of his successor more difficult. But for present purposes I am only a story teller and just presenting a yarn based on the official attitude to our less obvious, but none the less deadly, enemies at that time.

THE BITER BIT

LITTLE Mr. Thompson went to Scotland Yard with the highest patriotic motives; but he was a very busy man, so he thought it distinctly tiresome that, having told his story to a sympathetic policeman, he should be kept in the bleak interviewing room for nearly an hour and then be asked to tell it again.

"Queer sort of policeman too," he thought, as he glanced at the tall, stooping young man with absurdly long eyelashes whom the sergeant brought in. "Looks like one of those Hendon College chaps—university degree, I bet." His suppositions were, however, completely wrong. Vivien Pawlett-Browne was not a policeman and had never managed to pass an examination in his life.

Having lit a cigarette Mr. Thompson re-told his story as briefly as possible. "It's my partner I'm worried about; my firm is the Thompson Radio Company, of Croydon. Started it myself in 1933, but I never had enough capital to launch out. Then last spring Jacob Bauer came along and offered to put five thousand pounds into the business. He's a German Jew, of course, but a clever engineer and a very decent chap, so I took him in. Well, now there's a war on. Bauer's very anti-Hitler—and all that—but he's not even naturalized British. The Government's just given me a contract to make the new miniature transmitters—highly secret. Naturally Bauer will expect to see the blue prints when they turn up. Do I show them to him—or don't I? That's what I want to know."

Vivien smiled slowly. "Thanks, Mr. Thompson. My name's

Brown and I'll get in touch with you as soon as I've had a chance to check your partner up." A taxi took him back to his own office and half an hour later he was reporting to his Chief.

Sir Charles Forsyth—or 'Old Frosty'—as he was called by his staff—nodded the snow-white head which was only partially responsible for his nickname. "And Bauer, you say, is on that secret list of Reichstahl's that we managed to copy; so he is an enemy agent and probably passes on to Reichstahl anything he gets."

"We've got enough on Reichstahl to haul him in at any time, sir," Vivien hazarded.

"Yes. But he's much more useful to us as a lead. It's Bauer we've got to get, but as usual our hands are tied. There are scores of these Nazi agents who, having been vouched for by fools who know nothing about them, have been granted B Certificates. They put Gestapo money into munition works and have access to everything that goes on; yet without proof we can't even get a warrant to search either them or their houses. You must not lay a finger on him but go and see what you can do."

That evening Vivien rang up Mr. Thompson and arranged to be signed on to the factory staff under the name of Rudi Muller.

The following morning at eight he started work. At twelve, when the whistle went for lunch, he put his tools in a neat pile and was about to follow the other men towards the canteen when a white pudgy hand was laid on his arm.

"You're a new man, aren't you? I'm Mr. Bauer." The German's voice had only a slight accent. "What's your name?"

"Muller, sir."

"Ah, of German extraction?"

"Yes," Vivien retorted stiffly; "but none the less British for that."

Each day when Bauer made his round of the workshop he spoke pleasantly to Vivien, but the pseudo Rudi Muller remained non-committal and even seemed slightly embarrassed by the attention he received from his compatriot.

At the end of the week Vivien reported to his Chief and produced a typewritten slip. "I've arranged with Thompson that Bauer shall be given the blue-prints to take home to-morrow night," he said, "and this, sir, is what I suggest. You've had Reichstahl's in and out mail watched, so we've got photostatic copies of his writing. I want the departmental forger to do this note in Reichstahl's hand and post it off to-night."

The slip read:

This is just to let you know that I've gone down with flu so it would be best for you to keep away from me for a few days in case you catch it too. But I've arranged for my doctor to call and collect the book you promised me; it sounds very interesting.

"Then," Vivien added, "Reichstahl must be kept out of the way from first thing to-morrow until midnight. Could you hold him for twelve hours on suspicion of complicity in some civil crime, and apologize afterwards?"

Sir Charles gave his frosty smile. "Very good. I'll see to both matters for you."

At nine o'clock the following evening Vivien rang the bell of Bauer's flat. The German was a bachelor and lived alone so he opened the door himself, and his eyes widened with surprise as he recognized the factory hand—Rudi Muller.

Slipping quickly inside, Vivien seized the amazed man's hand and whispered: "*Heil, Hitler!*"

Bauer's face went blank, but Vivien grinned. "Sorry I had to be stand-offish in the factory, but we can't be too careful." He lowered his voice impressively. "Reichstahl's being watched. I'm the 'doctor' and he sent me to collect the 'book'."

The German hesitated a moment, then beckoning Vivien into his sitting-room he produced a large envelope and said: "Here are the blue-prints. Get them photographed to-night. I must to-morrow have them back for certain."

The ex-Rudi Muller took them with one hand and pulled out his gun with the other. "Thanks so much," he smiled. "You know, of course, that I have no power to search your flat or to take these from you; but since you've *given* them to me believing me to be a Nazi agent, I *have* got the power to arrest you as a German agent yourself. It's curious that your name rhymes with Tower, isn't it, dear Herr Bauer, since it's at the Tower of London that we shoot people like you."

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STORY XIX

THIS STORY, ONCE AGAIN, IS 'DIFFERENT' AND AN EXPERIMENT. I HAVE remarked earlier somewhere in these introductory notes that the commercial limit to a short story is a little over 5,000 words. For all practical purposes that is so, but I soon learned that there was an exception to this rule.

Clarence Winchester, the gifted author who was then editing the *Grand Magazine*, read some of my stuff and asked me to come to see him. He told me that he was always pleased to consider stories of up to 20,000 words—about a quarter the length of the average thriller novel—and he hoped that I would attempt this medium, which provided a field for people like myself whose plots were normally much too involved for them to be done justice in 5,000 words, yet some of which would not bear stretching to the full length of a book. He added that in his experience authors could always find a good story to tell if they drew on their own personal experience and, since I had been a wine-merchant, it would almost certainly ring the bell if I thought out a story which hinged upon something to do with wine.

The following story resulted from that conversation. Mr. Winchester did not buy it after all, and I certainly don't blame him. He was perfectly right in his contention that one grave fault in the story is that we see so little of the heroine and, another, that the coincidence which produced the *dénouement* is too far-fetched to meet the requirements of reasonable plausability. The snag was, of course, that once he had turned it down the thing became dead-wood, because it far exceeded the length that any other Editor would even consider.

However, I have no regrets at all for the time I gave to the writing of this story. By re-reading it I can recapture the sunshine and carefree joyousness of a vanished world—Biarritz at the height of the "Spanish" Season.

Geographically the story has no claim to be included in a Mediterranean series but, after all, during the last week in August no ordinary person dropped in Biarritz by parachute could have realized for quite a time that they were not staying at one of the millionaires' playgrounds in the South of France.

'Millionaire' is the operative word as, when I was there in 1925, they were actually charging 800 francs a night for a bedroom and bathroom, without food, at the Hotel du Palais. I should add that I was staying at quite a comfortable little *pension*, up the hill out of the square, for a mere 80 francs a day, like the hero in the story.

On the other hand, it is not recorded that he shared my good fortune in having a mother-in-law then staying on the sea front at the Carlton whose zest for life was only equalled by her generosity, and whose true wisdom once caused her to declare: "I cannot take my money away when I die, and it is so much better for all of us that I should see you children enjoy it while I am here than leave it to you when you may not be able to enjoy it any longer".

She was certainly well off but not rich in the sense that she could afford to disregard money; yet she was the sort of woman who would press a 1000-franc note into the hand of one of her sons-in-law after a good dinner and whisper: "See to the bill for me, dear, and keep whatever is over for a taxi home."

It is my firm belief that she has transferred her gold into a Bank from which no customer ever needs an overdraft; and that when she goes to the place beyond the Shadows there will always be young people to make merry with her.

"A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE . . ."

I

If I had not been a wine merchant I should never have been dragged into the affair—and as it turned out to be such a desperate business it was lucky for Toby Sinclair that I happened to supply his drink.

Have you ever been to Biarritz in the beginning of September?—that is *the* time, you know. They call it the Spanish Season, although nothing like so many wealthy Spaniards go there since poor Alfonso lost his job. Anyhow, last year I thought I'd have a fortnight's fun at Biarritz before going on to Bordeaux for the Vintage.

Johnnie Thornton was to have gone with me, but at the last minute he let me down because his partner underwent a nasty operation, so the evening after my arrival I was doing the round of the hotels, on the off-chance of running into someone that I knew.

I'd done the Carlton and the Angleterre, then I strolled into the lounge of the du Palais, although I hardly expected to find any of my friends there. It is the real top-notch, where the millionaires and film stars stay—a guinea a minute for a bedroom and fifty a week extra for a bath—you know the sort of thing! Anyway, I was just making my way over to a vacant table when I heard someone exclaim: "Why, hullo Brandon!—you're just the one man in the world I want to see."

I suppose I looked a bit astonished—it was Toby Sinclair. You must have heard of him—his father left him a million a few years ago, and he has since become famous as a motor-racing ace.

He buys a lot of wine, and often comes to my office in Pall Mall, but apart from business I hardly know him—and when we've run across each other in London he has never given me more than a casual nod, so I was a little taken aback by his sudden warmth.

"Come and sit down—that is if you can spare a minute," he said, drawing me over to his table, "and let me introduce you to the Baron de Selac."

"Sejac," corrected the broad-shouldered Frenchman quickly as we shook hands.

"Sorry." Tony's rather boyish smile lit up his freckled face for a second as he beckoned to a waiter. "Have a drink, Brandon—what's it to be?"

I ordered a Gin Fizz, and he went on at once:

"Look here—you must be wondering why I seized on you just now, but we're talking wine. The Baron is one of the big boys in Bordeaux—you'll probably know his firm."

I grinned politely. It is a common delusion with laymen that their wine merchant must have done business at one time or another with every Tom, Dick, and Harry who lives within fifty miles of Bordeaux, or any city of the Rhine. Actually, of course, there are thousands of them, and we only deal with about a dozen or so in either case; the big people who cater specially for the English market, and whose wines have given us satisfaction for generations. Naturally I asked the name of the Frenchman's firm, although I didn't expect for a moment that I should know anything about them.

"Sejac, Père et Fils," he answered promptly with a little bow. "Our trade with England is not great, but it may be that our name is known to you, Monsieur?"

I'd never heard of them in my life, but I hedged a bit, not wishing to offend the man. "You are *Negociants*, are you not?" I enquired, knowing that most of these fellows style themselves merchants, although in the majority of cases they only own a vineyard or two, and sell their crop to the big shippers for export.

He waved a large, bejewelled hand in deprecation. "A term that covers a multitude of transactions, Monsieur—in my case it is hardly justified. I am Proprietor with a number of Domains, but I sell mostly to Calvet, Creuze, Barton Guestier—these people you will know. However, at Sejac in the St. Emilion we make a very pretty wine—and of that I sell a little to my private friends in Paris, and to my English friends also."

So that was the idea! He was frank about it anyhow, and I saw young Sinclair being landed with two or three barracks of the fellow's wine. Naturally I wasn't any too pleased. Mind you, it wasn't so much that I should lose Sinclair's order, although if he bought from the Baron he wouldn't buy from me as far as claret was concerned, but I've seen it happen so often.

My customers go abroad—meet somebody like this plausible Frenchman, and try a bottle or two of their wine. Of course it tastes perfection when it is drunk on a vine-covered terrace with the bright sunshine playing on the vineyards spread out at your feet. The price sounds incredibly cheap—cheap enough to make the English wine merchant seem a bloated profiteer, and it *is* cheap too—if you could stay and drink it there, but you can't—that's just the trouble. It has got to be shipped home, and there's the duty to pay, and the freight, and insurance—so it's not quite such a marvellous bargain when you get it on the other side. But the sea journey is the real difficulty; unless it is a really first-class wine, or prepared by a shipper who knows his business, it turns sharp and acid, and then the trouble begins.

The customer comes into my office with a sheepish sort of smile, and says: "Look here, Brandon—when I was in Madeira" (or Lisbon—or Spain) "last year I bought a lot of wine—silly thing to do I

suppose, but it tasted marvellous there. Perhaps the fellow did me down and sent a different kind, anyhow it hasn't turned out too well, so I was wondering if you could take it off my hands. Of course I don't expect to get my money back, but I shall be wanting a little proper stuff from you." Then I have to pretend to be sympathetic and deal with his bargain. I'm not saying, mark you, that it's impossible for an Englishman outside the trade to buy good wines cheap abroad, but it needs real knowledge and experience, and in nine cases out of ten it ends up by our putting it in one of the London sale-rooms to be sold without reserve.

Sinclair cut in on my train of thought. "We were talking about the '28 and '29 Clarets, Brandon. The Baron assures me that the '28 was far the better year, and unless my memory is playing me tricks I'll swear that you were all for the '29's when you suggested I should put some down for future use."

"You're right," I told him, "and I stick to my opinion. For your purpose the '29's would prove much more satisfactory."

De Sejac screwed up his little black eyes as he watched me, and ran one hand down his thick, silky beard. He must have been a man of fifty at least, and a Frenchman of the old school. Suddenly he jerked himself forward and tapped the table with one fat forefinger. "But the '28's are better wines, Monsieur—glorious things—full of fruit, and life and vigour. The '29's are delicate, beautiful perhaps, and it is amazing that two such years should come together—but you must agree that it is the '28 which is outstanding—it will be the wine of the century!"

I nodded. Naturally I had heard it all before, and he was right in a way. The '28's are bigger, and in years to come the real claret lovers will rave about them—but that is just the trouble, the very fact that they are so fine makes them of doubtful commercial value for the moment. It will be twenty or thirty years before they are at their best, and who, in these uncertain times, can afford to put wine away for a quarter of a century? It's hard luck on the Bordeaux people because they got tremendously excited about the '28's and in the ordinary way would have sold them at fine prices. Then '29 came along, another splendid vintage but lighter—more elegant, and wines which will be perfection in ten years time, so the English merchants have been buying '29's which are a business proposition, and the Frenchman has got the '28's still on his hands. I put the case as mildly as I could.

"Yes, yes," De Sejac hastened to agree. "That is the difference. For an old man it would be a stupidity to put down '28's. Like those so wonderful '70's, it will be many years before they mature—he would not live to see them in their beauty; but Monsieur Sinclair is young—when he reach my age what a joy to have such wines in his cellar! Let him have a little '29 also to fill the years between, but in these days it is so rare to meet a young man who has the true love of fine wine—and the fortunate finance to indulge his tastes. For him to overlook the '28's—it would be calamity!"

"I must think it over," said Sinclair non-committally, "I suppose

the Baron is right, but I shall probably have broken my neck on the race track before either of them is fit to drink. Let's have another while the going is good. Hi, *garçon*! here a minute!"

"Do you make white wine on your estates?" I asked the Baron, by way of making conversation.

"Assuredly, Monsieur." His rather fleshy lips drew back in a quick grin. "We cultivate the white grape where we can. As you will know conditions have changed completely since the war, and white wines are in great demand."

"Yes," I agreed, "it's quite extraordinary. I was only in business for a year or so before the war, but in those days we used to sell six dozen of red wine to every dozen of white; now it is the other way about."

"What happens to all the Claret then?" Sinclair enquired. "America has gone dry, Russia is out of the market, Germany is in too bad a way to be much of a customer—yet red wine isn't any cheaper. Have you let large portions of your vineyards go out of cultivation?"

"It has been necessary to some extent," De Sejac nodded.

"Pity you can't make white wine out of black grapes" Sinclair suggested with a laugh.

The Baron shrugged his broad shoulders. "Alas, Monsieur, if only we could do that we should be fortunate indeed—but to make white wine out of black grape—that is impossible."

II

I was just about to question De Sejac further about his estates when Toby Sinclair gave a little gasp.

"Look! isn't she just perfect?"

We had no need to ask him who he meant; a girl of twenty-two or three was passing through the lounge. Fair curling hair waved back to a shimmering knot caught up on the nape of her slender neck, and for one second I glimpsed her eyes—large, and of that deep pansy blue, so rare in any case but seen occasionally in the blue-eyed brunette—hardly ever in a blonde.

"Ahaaa," a long-drawn sigh escaped the Frenchman, "beautiful indeed! and what glorious little feet—English I think—you know her perhaps, Monsieur?" He looked at Sinclair.

Toby nodded. "Just—I saw her at the *Golf* yesterday afternoon and then I bumped into her at the *Bains de Mer* this morning—she was quite on her own and we had a spot of laughter together. I wonder who she is—anyhow, I'm going to know her better before I'm much older. She's off to the Casino I expect."

"And you will follow is it not?" De Sejac's black eyes sparkled suddenly.

"Why not?" Toby stood up quickly, "if she's alone here she's fair game isn't she?—any woman is, who comes to Biarritz in the Spanish season without a boy friend."

De Sejac had also risen. "Exactly, Monsieur Sinclair, and for that very reason I would like to give you a little warning—I saw her this afternoon when she watch the Pelota. On this occasion also she was alone. I found myself much interested, because women of such real beauty are very rare. It would not be good sport for me to make the suggestion that I accompany you to the Casino now. Instead I make you the challenge—she shall sup with me before she sup with you!"

"But you haven't even spoken to her yet" Toby protested.

The Frenchman shrugged. "My acquaintance in Biarritz is extensive—believe me, I shall procure an introduction before very long—Au Revoir, Monsieur Sinclair!"

"All right," Toby's boyish grin flashed out again, "I'll beat you to it—see you again sometime Brandon—so long!" In another minute he was hurrying through the swing doors of the lounge.

I turned to De Sejac. "To resume our discussion on wine," I said. "Of course we English merchants don't know much about the making of wine but——"

"Pardon Monsieur," he cut me short, "I have no time now to talk of wine—I join a party at the Pavillion Royal to-night—the hour has come—you will excuse?"

His brevity was bordering on impertinence, and his whole manner had undergone a sudden change—he did not seek to hide the fact that, Sinclair having departed, he was no longer interested in the question, and had no sort of time to waste on me at all. However, it was no loss to me as I had taken a dislike to the fellow from the first, so I nodded in reply to his formal little bow, and slowly stroking his black beard he moved off between the tables.

I remained at the du Palais for a bit, quietly finishing my drink while I thought over Sinclair and De Sejac. It was obvious that they didn't know each other well, otherwise Toby would never have made that mistake in the Baron's name when he first introduced us—evidently they were just chance hotel acquaintances, but something the Frenchman had let slip made me wonder what his game was, and I thought it would be amusing to find out.

I was still thinking about him when I left the du Palais twenty minutes later, and there he was—standing in the entrance of the hotel. A big private car had just drawn up with a chauffeur in livery. De Sejac climbed in, and off they went, but not before I had taken the number—I thought it just possible that it might come in useful later on.

After that I started to stroll home. I was staying at the Hotel des Princes, which may sound very grand but it is actually a modest little place up the hill and round the corner from the Place. It was a lovely night and I was in no hurry to go to bed, so I took a circuitous route along the sea shore. I paused a little to watch the great Atlantic rollers in their ceaseless procession, as they broke and shivered into cascades of foam about the Virgin's Rock. It was cool and refreshing down there after the long hot day, and the stifling atmosphere of the hotel. The moonlight on the water was magnificent, and behind

there were the myriad lights of the town, while the music of the band came faintly from the terraced height of the Hotel des Anglais, subdued but perceptible through the thunderous roaring of the surf.

Then I turned up the hill, and passed the Casino—but I am not a gambler so I didn't go in. I did wonder though if Toby Sinclair was making any headway with that glorious girl. She seemed almost too good to be true, and I'll confess that I was envious of that young devil with his million and his racing cars. Say what you will those sort of things do help even with the very nicest women, and though I say it as shouldn't—given equal chances I would have beaten Toby every time. As for the Baron—I did not see that he would get a look in, although you never know—women do prefer older men sometimes, they have so much more experience.

When I got back to my hotel I took the trouble to write a letter to my old friend Dubaudin. He owns what's left of the historic Chateau outside St. Emilion, overlooking the old Castillon battlefield where the French fought the English years ago for the possession of Bordeaux.

III

On the following day I saw nothing of Toby Sinclair, the Baron, or the Girl, for the simple reason that I had planned a trip to Pampluna, and it's an all day show.

We passed St. Jean de Luz in the morning and crossed the Spanish frontier at Irun. I always think there is a certain magic in that name, and the Frontier Guards in their pirate hats and shiny cloaks standing in the sunshine, lent the place a sort of unreality—as if it were a scene from a musical comedy at home. Then we went up through the foothills of the Pyrenees—through those old, old Spanish towns and villages that must have remained unaltered for centuries; then down again through the twisting ways into San Sebastian, with its wide squares, broad streets, and lovely bay.

By that time the heat was positively sweltering, and we were glad enough to stop for lunch at a little restaurant where the tables were set out on the pavement, and shaded from the glare by the cool arches of the colonnade that surrounds the square.

I was a little disappointed with San Sebastian when we strolled round after lunch. It's a fine town, and nice enough perhaps out of the season—but the beach and promenades were seething with the same sort of riff-raff that invades Brighton over August Bank Holiday week-end, and as they were poor class Spaniards, you simply couldn't move without getting a fair share of the garlic that they had eaten with their midday meal.

After an hour we set off again—this time right up into the lovely wooded hills, and we climbed thousands of feet above the sea, until, late in the afternoon we came to the great monastery that was the birthplace of the Jesuits—where St. Ignatius Loyola worked and died.

The gilding of the shrines is quite marvellous if a little dazzling, but the woodwork and the pictures are a joy to see, for anyone who loves such things.

Then we took the road once more, round the curves and bends of the mountain passes, with view after view opening up before us in the clear afternoon sunlight—and so gradually down through the pine forests on the other side, back through Irun and St. Jean to Biarritz and dinner at the hotel.

It was a long day but I was glad that I had done it, though I didn't feel like going out afterwards, so I sat talking until bedtime on the terrace with another fellow who'd been on the trip.

The day after I saw Sinclair twice—once after my morning bathe at the far bay round the point where the beach stretches away in an unbroken line towards St. Jean and Hendaye. He was alone then, still in his bathing wrap and climbing into his six-litre Bentley, just about to roar away up the hill to lunch. Then I saw him again in the afternoon at the Polo, and this time he had the lovely lady with him. I watched them with interest, wondering how he was getting on with her—but it didn't look to me as if she had fallen for him yet.

Toby's great attractions are his nerve on the race-track, and his wealth. He is a bit of a cave man of course, and some women like that sort of thing. He's not bad looking, either, in a fair-haired English sort of way, but he's so used to women running after him that he has never cultivated the art of taking trouble—and it seemed to me that the Girl was rather bored. However, it looked as if he was well ahead of the Baron, and once again I envied him his luck.

I had reason to change my opinion about the Frenchman an hour or two later though, for when I got back I ran into my friend of the night before—and he suggested a cocktail at the Bar Basque. Directly we arrived I spotted De Sejac sitting at a little table overlooking the sea, and the Girl was with him—but Toby was nowhere to be seen!

We were only a few tables away and De Sejac looked straight at me as we sat down, without the slightest sign of recognition. He talked incessantly—and well, as only these foreign fellows can—telling anecdote after anecdote with a wealth of gesture and the most amusing grimaces. He was a different person to the surly brute who had given me the cold shoulder at the du Palais a couple of nights before, but I could see that the Girl was thoroughly enjoying the fun. She sat leaning forward, smiling a little all the time, and now and then breaking into the most delicious laughter—it looked now as if De Sejac would beat Toby to that supper every time!

The next day I saw all three again. The smart world of Biarritz is quite tiny. There is the Square—the Golf—the Bathing Beach, I mean the smart one to the South—the Casino and half a dozen bars. Everybody drifts into one or other according to the hour, and after you've been there a day or two it is nothing to see the familiar faces of complete strangers half a dozen times a day.

It was the Girl and Toby bathing in the morning—then after the siesta, when the whole town goes dead just as if you were in Spain, De Sejac and the Girl having tea together at the Miramar, which does

a roaring trade. You know how these fat French and Spanish women wolf chocolate, and all those creamy cakes!

When I had been there a little time Toby came in. He looked towards De Sejac's table as if he had half a mind to join them. The Girl threw him a quick smile, and then looked away, so his nerve failed him. Looking round he spotted me, and plumped down into the chair opposite.

"Well?" I said casually, "all alone?" Of course it was beastly of me, but frankly I was just a little bit pleased to see that spoilt young man up against it for once.

He frowned across the table, then he grinned suddenly, which made me like him better. "I'm being cut out," he said quickly. "Look at her— isn't she a peach, but I'm hanged if I can make her laugh the way that bouncer De Sejac does!"

"Have some chocolate" I suggested, warming to him a little— then I lowered my voice "Don't worry about De Sejac—I think I'll be able to queer his pitch for you in a day or two."

He leant forward quickly. "Just what do you mean, Brandon?"

"I don't quite know," I confessed, "he may be a Baron perhaps— although I doubt it—but I'm certain about one thing—he does not know much about wine."

"So that's the idea?" Sinclair's face broke into a superior grin. "Jealous, eh, Brandon?"

"What the devil do you mean," I asked angrily.

"Easy—isn't it?" He picked a cigarette out of his gold and platinum case and lit it carefully. "You're scared you're going to lose a customer—that's what I mean—afraid I'll buy a hogshead or two of claret from De Sejac, and you want to spike his guns! I'm not a fool, Brandon, so don't trouble to treat me like one—I buy in the best market—that's all there is to it; but I like to have someone that I can sling my stuff back on if it's not right—so don't you worry your stupid head—I shan't give him an order, but don't trouble to be melodramatic about the Baron either—it's just . . . not necessary!"

For a moment I had an intense desire to choke that young man with the chocolate éclair that he was eating. The question of orders had simply not entered my head for the last three days—I was just trying to cheer him up in the face of the Girl's obvious preference for the Frenchman. As it was I hit back in the place where I thought it would hurt him most!

"Pity you're quite so rich," I said, "and can't realize that now and then people forget their bread and butter—if you were capable of that, you might be sitting where De Sejac is now!"

It was a cheap retort, and anyhow it missed its point, because young Sinclair simply did not understand. He looked at me stupidly for a moment, then he turned the conversation to the polo of the afternoon. Later on he insisted on paying for both our teas, and we walked out into the sunshine.

"Where are you off to?" he enquired.

"My hotel," I replied promptly. He really was a vulgar little

brute, and I saw no point in remaining in his company—so we parted on the *Place*.

At the hotel I found a letter waiting for me. It was a reply from Dubaudin, and several sheets were covered with his thin, spidery writing. The gist of it was that he would be delighted to see me later on in September when the vintage was in full swing—there was a Baron de Sejac and a chateau of that name quite near his own property, but the owner was a young man who had been in Martinique for several years. The person who I had met in Biarritz was obviously a fraud.

Dubaudin then went on to say that he had been sufficiently intrigued to take my letter to the Préfecture de Police—they had telephoned to Paris and the result was interesting.

A man resembling the one I had described was wanted for certain offences committed on the Riviera in June and July. He always stayed at expensive hotels, and worked with a chauffeur and a car. If I had mentioned the hotel at which he was staying the police could have investigated the matter at once. As I had omitted to do so, would I communicate with the Biarritz police immediately—because the pseudo Baron was quite possibly the man they wanted. I bathed and changed, and came down to dinner in a much more lively frame of mind.

IV

Of course it was not really my affair. De Sejac, or whoever he was, had done me no harm, but if he was wanted by the police it was obviously my job to give information. Besides, he might be plotting all sorts of mischief to lighten the pockets of the millionaires at the du Palais, and quite frankly, I wasn't sorry to have the opportunity of showing young Sinclair that I hadn't been talking through my hat.

I wrote a brief note to the Prefect of Police, and enclosing Dubaudin's letter with it, sent it off immediately after dinner.

Then it occurred to me that it might be rather fun to see the end of the affair. If I hurried, it was just possible that I might see the spurious Baron sent for by the management of the hotel and quietly removed by the police.

It was nearly eleven when I reached the du Palais and the guests were drifting out from dinner. Everyone dines late in Biarritz, you know, just as they do in Spain. I had not been in the lounge more than five minutes when De Sejac passed my table with Sinclair. Toby was not looking in my direction, but the Baron was, and he looked right through me with a cold, insolent stare, just as he had two afternoons before at the Bar Basque.

I couldn't help chuckling when I thought of what was coming to him! My messenger must just about have reached the Prefecture, and as the two of them sat down at a table only twenty feet away I was pretty certain to see the fun.

A few minutes later the girl joined them. She was looking more

lovely than ever, if that was possible, and she smiled equally upon Toby and De Sejac. It seemed for the moment that honours were even—but not for long.

After they had had coffee and liqueurs the Baron said something to her and they both stood up. He helped her deftly with her coat, and Toby, looking pretty sullen I thought, got to his feet and evidently said good-night. The others moved off together towards the hotel entrance.

"What does A do now?" I wondered—they were probably off to the Casino—well, Monsieur le Baron would get a nasty jar when he returned to the hotel—the police would be waiting for him!

But then a sudden thought occurred to me; what if De Sejac had beaten Toby at the post, and was taking the girl off to supper at one of those dance places outside the town?—and what if the police followed him and pinched him while he was supping with her?—that would be a rotten business.

For a second I thought of going over to Toby and warning him what might happen so that he could follow them up and be on hand in the event of trouble, but on second thoughts I decided against that. Why should I?—he'd been devilish rude to me that afternoon—I would go myself. Of course I didn't know the girl, but I could tell her that I was a friend of Toby's and see her safely back to the hotel—that is if the need arose, and I suppose it was a bit selfish of me, but I had begun to hope it would. Anyhow, I flung the waiter a note and dashed out of the lounge.

I was just in time to see De Sejac disappear into his car, and as the commissionaire slammed the door it set off at a good pace.

I jumped into a long-nosed taxi as they turned the corner—"Quick," I yelled to the driver—"follow that car!"

We sped through the Place de la Republic, and up the hill past my modest caravanserai. Obviously my second surmise had been correct. We had already left the Casino far behind us and were off to one of the all night dance places which are such a feature of the Spanish Season in Biarritz.

They lie anything from three to ten miles outside the town, set like glow-worms in the isolation of the pine woods. Tiny places for the most part, with a floor the size of a pocket handkerchief.

A jazzy band blares unceasingly at one end, while the wealthy holiday crowd, jammed like sardines in a tin, move slowly round and round, forgetful of the spacious scented woods beyond the match-board walls. Its queer that—but the type which frequents them seems only happy in a stifling crush, and it is always the small places that do well, whether it is in London, Paris, or New York.

I took out my pocket-book and counted my money; fortunately I was well supplied as I knew that I had let myself in for a horribly expensive evening. The car alone would be five hundred francs—champagne at two pounds a bottle—supper and tips! I should be the poorer by a *mille* at least.

I leant forward, peering into the darkness as I wondered for which of the night haunts we were making. Not 'Chez Casanova'

evidently, the 'Florida' perhaps. I had been lucky in my choice of taxi—it fairly rocked as the fellow took the bends, but we never lost sight of De Sejac's tail lamp for more than a moment.

Another few miles, and we rattled down into what I knew to be one of the loveliest of valleys. A good-sized lake lay shimmering in the moonlight, and at one corner of it among the stunted pines, showed the bright lights of the 'Florida' streaming out on to the water. Clear on the night air above the noise of the slowing engine, came the rhythmic cadence of the negro band, and as I left the taxi I could hear the tinkle of the plates and glasses from the three-sided shed behind the little restaurant, which served for a scullery.

It was barely midnight, and few people had arrived as yet. Those places don't get really busy until about two o'clock, and I wondered rather how I should manage to pass the time, as I was alone. As it turned out I had no need to worry, for I had hardly seated myself at a table in a quiet corner from which I could watch the Baron without seeming too inquisitive, when Toby Sinclair walked in.

He came over to me at once. "Hullo! Brandon—mind if I join you if you're on your own?"

"Of course not," I replied, "sit down."

Then he laughed a little ruefully. "I say—I'm sorry about this afternoon—'fraid I wasn't too polite."

"You were not," I answered him. "However, let's forget it."

"Fact is," he went on, "I'm a bit worried—I've got it pretty badly this time, and you see the situation!"

I followed his glance in the direction of De Sejac and the girl. "Yes, I thought as much—but if I may say so, are you really improving your chances by trailing her like this?"

"Good Lord!—why not?—shows I'm keen, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I agreed slowly, "but some women might resent it."

"Don't you believe it!" he gave a hard little laugh. "What I don't know about women isn't worth knowing—they always fall for you if you show 'em you mean business."

He wasn't more than about twenty-five—but if half the stories one hears about him are true, I could well believe him. If you are a millionaire, a famous racing motorist, and a healthy-looking six foot into the bargain, you can very soon acquire a knowledge of women if your predilections lie that way—that is, of a certain type of woman. But somehow I didn't feel that this girl would prove quite such an easy nut for Master Toby to crack—even when the police had removed the Baron.

"Did you come in a taxi?" he asked suddenly. "If you did you'd better go and sack him; they charge you the earth waiting about all night at these places—I'll run you home."

"Thanks," I said, and left him to do as he suggested—wondering rather at this sudden thoughtfulness. Still, its millionaire's economies that keeps them millionaires, I suppose, and although it wasn't saving his pocket—it's in the blood!

When I got back I found that he had ordered a magnum of the best champagne, at least as far as the label went—but that doesn't

mean much on the Continent; and a supper for which I thanked my gods I hadn't got to pay.

The place had begun to fill up a bit, and the floor already seemed as full as it could be, although I knew that twice the number would get on it somehow in an hour or so. Toby was glowering resentfully at the girl.

"What the devil is she doing on her own in Biarritz—that is what I can't make out," he said suddenly.

"Why didn't you ask her when you had the chance?" I inquired.

"I did—but she wouldn't tell me. She must have money to stay at the Palais, and I thought at first she must be on the stage. Actresses and what we used to call ladies are so much alike these days, you can't tell t'other from which by their dresses or their morals—but I don't think she is. Anyhow, a girl who travels on her own is fair game for any man, and I'll pull it off somehow—you see if I don't!"

I noticed a queer mixture of spoilt child and elderly roué in Sinclair's expression as he spoke—it was not a pleasant look.

He took a big gulp of champagne and then put down his glass with an impatient gesture. "Heavens! What muck this is—why is it that you can never get champagne fit to drink outside England?"

"I'll show you a trick that will make it drinkable anyhow," I volunteered. "Send for some lump sugar and some Angostura Bitters."

When the waiter brought them I sprinkled a few drops of Angostura on two lumps of sugar and dropped one into each glass. It's a thing I often do abroad, and it converts the most inferior champagne into a quite palatable champagne cocktail—besides which the Angostura lessens the chance of a bad head in the morning.

Toby had another swig at it and grinned approval. "That's better," he said. "Really, Brandon, you're a jolly useful chap to have around."

"Thanks," I said dryly. I don't know if I'm over touchy, but honestly, he is an ill-mannered little brute.

A cabaret of sorts came on at one o'clock, and after that the place got pretty hectic—streamers, paper hats and all the rest of it, while the nigger band worked themselves into a perfect frenzy.

De Sejac did not dance, but sat there with the girl, obviously keeping her well amused with his chatter. Toby had done more than his fair share of the magnum after my intervention with the Angostura, and ordered up another. He was looking pretty flushed, but I had no fears about his driving on the way home; handling a car is second nature to him—drunk or sober.

After the cabaret he began dancing with one of the *filles du Maison*—a little French girl, and brought her back to our table with her friend. They were a cheerful couple, and infinitely more presentable than their counterparts in the dreary London night clubs of Kate Meyrick's day. They made the time pass quickly, and Toby temporarily forgot his jealousy in a fit of boisterous good humour.

It must have been after three when I saw De Sejac and the girl preparing to depart. There had been no sign of the police after all,

but they were probably waiting for him at the hotel. I drew Toby's attention, and he nodded.

"Right oh! We'll follow, you slip out and see if they take the road to Biarritz or along the Lake—I know which it would be if she were with me—and no damned nonsense either! Still, if he tries any funny business that's different—it would just suit my book to step in as the noble rescuer. I'd give that black-eyed Baron a mouthful of teeth too. Quick! Off you go while I settle the bill."

I left him, but I didn't hurry, because I felt that his hopes—or fears, whichever you like to call them—were quite unjustified. Of course he himself was just the type to run the girl off into the woods and try a little rough stuff—threaten to leave her to walk home too, if she turned unpleasant. He was quite capable of it—but not the Baron. He might be a crook and was probably a cad as well, but foreigners view these things differently. They like their comforts, and half measures in cars are regarded by them as queer, and barbarous.

When I got outside I found De Sejac's car already on the road. The engine was running and the chauffeur was sitting quietly at the wheel. Immediately behind it stood Toby's long Bentley.

The Baron and the girl stood talking beside his limousine, and as I approached I could see him casting furtive glances over his shoulder towards the restaurant.

The cars were a little outside the angle of the arc lamps, and directly De Sejac caught sight of my white shirt-front through the trees he looked away. I passed behind a little hedge, then—just as I came out beside Toby's car, I heard a smothered scream. There were the girl and De Sejac struggling in the roadway. There was no one else about and it was all over in a second. He had one arm round her waist, and his other hand clasped firmly over her mouth.

With a sudden lurch he threw her face downwards on the floor at the back of the car and jumped in. Before I even had a chance to run forward the car was screaming up the hill towards Biarritz.

V

I didn't waste a second on Toby, but fairly leapt into his car. I had the brakes off like a flash, and put the Bentley into action. A moment later I was roaring up the hill after De Sejac at breakneck speed.

At the top I was just in time to see him turn to the northward and I swung the car hard on his heels. Then we settled down to a really thrilling chase.

As I drove I couldn't help wondering what the devil had possessed the man. Had he gone mad—or what? Of course the girl had asked for trouble coming out alone with a chap like that, but if he wanted to be tiresome why not wait until she was safely in the car. It seemed such a stupid thing to go and attack her in the road like that. He must have known that I couldn't help seeing the struggle. The whole thing was so unlike a Frenchman's methods with a woman—it was

more like an undergraduate who had got tight and lost his head—no finesse about the thing at all!

De Sejac's chauffeur evidently knew his business, and he knew the country too. They fairly hurtled round the bends, and despite the fact that I had the better car I found myself dropping behind after a mile or two. I dared not take too many chances on the corners although I made it up a bit on a long straight stretch, and catching a glimpse of the sea with the moon sinking into it miles away on my left, I knew that we were still heading northward.

When the car ahead entered the woods again I was still a good half mile behind. We raced round another succession of hairpin bends, at one of which I near as nothing wrecked the car and broke my neck. It was a nightmare journey, and when I came out on to the other side of the wooded spur I knew that I had lost him.

There had been no fork or turning in the woods I felt certain, but I could see the country for miles in the half-light, with the road winding away below me, and not a sign of his lights were to be seen. I pulled the car into the side of the road and switched off the engine, hoping that I might hear him—but not a sound broke the stillness.

I knew that he must have slipped me in those beastly woods somewhere, and I was furious. It seemed that the only thing to do was to drive slowly back, and see if I could spot any turning which I had missed before. It was no easy job to reverse the Bentley on that hill road, but I did it, and set off again into the darkness of the woods. I hadn't gone more than half a mile before I found a likely spot. It was hardly more than an opening in the trees leading towards the sea, but when I switched Toby's spotlight on to it there were fresh car-tracks on the mould.

That was the way he'd gone all right, so I turned the Bentley into the woods and drove slowly along on his trail.

After a few hundred yards the track ended at a pair of wrought iron gates set in a high wall, so I switched off my engine and got out. The gates were secured by a rusty chain and padlock, but I could tell that the latter had been used quite recently from the dark stains of oil, and the mess that came off on my fingers. It was no use trying to get in that way, so I turned off the lights of the car and started to follow the right-hand side of the wall. The coping was badly broken in places and I soon found a gap where a big lump of stonework had fallen down, so I scrambled up into it and slid down the other side.

I don't mind telling you, I was pretty worried by then as to what might be happening to that lovely girl—but I was stupid enough to grin, as the thought flashed into my mind how strange it was that Fate should have chosen me for the part of heroic rescuer, instead of Toby. Ten minutes later I wasn't so almighty pleased with myself, but I'll tell you about that in due course.

The garden was overgrown and thick with weeds. The house too, when I reached it a few minutes later, seemed to be completely deserted. It was a good-sized villa and the proper entrance was on the other side, where there must have been a fine view of the sea in the daytime. I

could just make out the drive, which was sprouting every kind of vegetation. All the windows of the villa were closely shuttered, and it was obvious that the place had not been lived in for some years. I began to wonder if I'd gone off the track again, but the car marks in the wood had been so plain I felt pretty certain that the villa was De Sejac's secret hang-out.

I prowled round the place looking for some sign of life, and on the far side I found it; little chinks of light coming from the jalousies of one of the lower rooms at the south-west corner.

The window was about six feet above my head, and I noticed that one of the slats was broken, so that if only I could reach it I could see straight into the room.

Not being Douglas Fairbanks I had to look round for something to put against the wall, but I was lucky enough to find an old garden table on the terrace and a couple of garden chairs.

It was a bit of a job getting them along without giving the alarm to the people in the villa, but I managed it, and formed a precarious sort of pyramid. It rocked a little beneath my weight, but I balanced myself carefully, and hung on by the iron hooks in the wall that kept the shutters back when they are open.

I found that I could see most of the room—it was only half-furnished and there was no carpet on the floor—but the girl was there. Her face was turned away from me and she was sitting quietly in an arm-chair. De Sejac did not seem to be anywhere about and I was just going to tap on the window to attract her attention when the chauffeur came in. He said something to her—what, of course, I couldn't hear—but he leaned against the mantelpiece in a casual sort of way, and for all the animation she showed they might have been talking about the weather.

I had hoped that I might get her out through the window, but I suddenly realized that there were heavy iron bars behind the shutters. If I was going to do any good I should have to find some way of getting in, so I climbed down again and began a thorough inspection of all the ground floor entrances, testing each door and window as I went.

They were all securely fastened on the inside, and I didn't want to use force if I could avoid it because of the noise I was bound to make. You see, De Sejac and his man would easily have overpowered me between them, and for all I knew there might have been others in the house. My only chance lay in getting the girl away without their knowledge—or taking them by surprise one at a time.

I had almost made up my mind to take a chance and break in when I came across a partly open window at the back, almost opposite the gates where I had left the car. I eased it open gently, and then I must confess—I paused.

De Sejac must be a pretty desperate character, and if I ran up against him and his man I might land myself in real trouble. Perhaps it would be better to go back to Biarritz and fetch the police—but then there was the girl! Anything might happen to her in the meantime, so I screwed up my courage and slipped inside.

It was dark as pitch, and I couldn't see a single thing, but from the stone flags beneath my feet I guessed that I was in a passage, and with one hand on the outer wall to guide me, I began to creep in the direction of the south-west room, which I reckoned to be somewhere on the floor above at the far end of the house.

I had hardly taken two steps when I thought I heard the scrape of a boot behind me. Then, even before I had a chance to whip round I felt my teeth snap together with a click—every nerve in my head leapt into an agony of pain as I was struck from behind. For a second my eyeballs seemed to be starting out of their sockets—I saw red wheels of light whirling at tremendous speed and the floor rocked beneath me. Then I felt myself falling—down—down—into the darkness of a bottomless pit.

VI

I have no idea how long I remained unconscious, although I don't think it can have been very long. When I came to I was lying on a truckle bed with my feet bound, my hands tied behind me, and a gag in my mouth. It was dark but not quite pitch; there was enough light to show me that I was lying with my face to the wall, and when I rolled over I discovered where the faint light came from.

There were tiny lines of brightness across the ceiling. At first I thought they came from the effects of the knock-out I had had, but after a bit I realized that the room above was brightly lighted and the lines were the cracks between the floorboards.

My head was fairly splitting, and I was almost sick from a beastly pain behind my eyes, so I lay very still for a little, and didn't even try to think about my wretched situation.

Very slowly it came to me that there were people in the room above, and they were talking. I could even make out what they were saying when I concentrated my attention. As the pain eased a little I shifted my position and struggled into a sitting posture with my back against the wall.

There seemed to be three voices, De Sejac's, another, gruff and surly, and the girl's.

"No, no," the Baron was saying, "not yet—I have other plans for you."

Then the girl's voice, but so low I couldn't catch the words.

De Sejac laughed softly. "*Ma chère*, you have been marvellous, the most perfect pigeon—you could not have played your part better if I had trained you to it for years—the young fool walked right into the trap—all will be easy now."

The girl spoke again, but a gruff voice, which must have been the chauffeur's, cut her short. He was evidently speaking to the Baron. "Have done, *mon vieux*—I have far to go before the morning—where are the telegrams?"

"Ah, the telegrams," repeated De Sejac. "Behold, they are here—I have written them in English, but I will translate them for you so

that there can be no errors. The first one—that is address to Peter Heels, his valet, and it reads: '*Send light baggage and papers care of Chef de Gare Angouleme also hotel bill stop will wire necessary money stop am returning to England by car stop pack heavy luggage and return London wait my arrival. SINCLAIR.*' The other is address 'Manager, Hotel du Palais, Biarritz,' and says: '*Wire amount of bill and despatch luggage Chef de Gare Poitiers stop instruct Chef release luggage on payment of bill he to remit to you. RICHARDSON, Room 406.*' You will hand them in at Dax just as they are written—that is as far as he could be expected to go to-night. To-morrow you will go on to Angouleme and collect the bags in which should be his cheque-book—also you will wire the money for the bill—that is essential or his valet would not be allowed to leave. The money which I give you should be ample, and whatever the sum may be we add it to the cheque which he shall sign for us to-morrow night. After, you will return here with all speed. Go now, I will unlock the gates, and see to the safe disposal of his car."

"Yes—it is good, there is no slip that I can see," replied the other man cautiously—"but what of her baggage, and in the meantime what of him?—you are assured that there can be no escape?"

"My careful Frederic," purred the Baron, "for the luggage of Mademoiselle there is ample time—as for him, in my hands he is quite safe. He will have an unpleasant day to-morrow—no food, no drink—it is always best to make short these operations whenever possible. It is a kindness in reality, and he will be more ready to take a pen in hand without further trouble. We will talk to him together on your return."

A door slammed somewhere above my head and after that there was silence; evidently the two men had gone out together.

Slowly and painfully, for my head hurt like the very devil, I began to try and puzzle things out. The girl was one of the gang, of course, otherwise De Sejac would not have complimented her on her acting, and that explained why she had been talking so calmly with the chauffeur when I watched them through the window. I must confess that rattled me a bit; she was so very lovely and not a bit like the traditional vamp; but then, no really clever crook would be fool enough to choose the sort of woman likely to be suspected. But why, I wondered, that elaborate piece of by-play outside the 'Florida' when he flung her in the car? I couldn't make that out at all, so I had to leave it for the moment.

I considered the two telegrams; why in the world should Toby's valet act on instructions coming from Dax when his master was still staying at the hotel in Biarritz? Then I got a sudden flash of enlightenment. De Sejac believed that it had been Toby that he had seen coming through the trees—Toby who had followed him in the car, and Toby who had come in through the window only to be knocked on the head! I should have spotted that before if my brain hadn't been so muzzy—but having got that far, all the bits of the puzzle began to fall into place.

De Sejac had evidently singled out Toby from the beginning as

worthy of a hold-up. If he had got him out to the villa on any ordinary pretext, Toby would have been missed and the police informed. So a carefully thought-out play had been staged to cover his disappearance. First the girl picks Toby up on the bathing beach and tips the Baron off that she has done her stuff. Then De Sejac gets into conversation with him in the lounge—that was where I got drawn into it—and he quickens the young man's interest in the girl by threatening to become a rival, although he makes out that he doesn't even know her. After that it is easy for her to play up, and pretend to prefer the Frenchman until Toby is fairly boiling with jealousy. The critical point in the campaign arrived when De Sejac took her off to the Florida: would Toby follow them or not? If he hadn't nothing was lost, it would only have meant another day or two's work until a similar occasion arose.

The chauffeur must have arranged the cars one behind the other—then all they had to do was to stand talking for a few minutes until Toby followed them out of the restaurant.

Directly they saw me approaching through the trees De Sejac did his kidnapping act, believing that Toby would see it and give chase. They probably counted on his missing the track in the woods to give them time to get into the villa. De Sejac and the chauffeur must have waited by the only open window until the would-be rescuer put his stupid head in—then biff!—they had him cold.

By degrees I began to work out the rest of the plot and it was devilish ingenious. Toby and his car had disappeared—in the morning his valet would get a telegram from Dax, his light luggage and cheque-book would be put on the train for Angoulême—where presumably he would pick them up and continue his journey. Money would be wired, apparently by him, to pay the hotel bill, upon which Heels would pack the heavy luggage and return to England where he would certainly not begin to worry about his master for at least a week. In the meantime De Sejac's man would collect the bags at Angoulême, bring them back to the villa, and Toby would be starved or beaten into signing a nice fat cheque. They would keep him a prisoner, of course, until they had cleared it and got the cash.

But why should the girl not have returned to her hotel, I wondered? Then, in a moment I had that too, and it was the cleverest bit of the whole boiling. Miss Richardson's bill was to be paid by wire as well, and her luggage sent to Poitiers. She had been seen about with Toby a good bit these last few days, and hotel servants talk.

It would be assumed that they had gone off together on a joy-ride. That was the perfect explanation for Toby's sudden disappearance. Her luggage being sent to Poitiers instead of Angoulême, was just the sort of transparent subterfuge that anybody like Toby would be expected to employ to protect the lady's name. And how the servants would chortle about it! Poitiers was only another seventy miles on the road to Paris, and everybody would see through it as an unofficial honeymoon.

I began to speculate on what was likely to happen in reality; Toby's man would get the telegram all right, and doubtless pass it

on to him. When he found that neither his car nor I had returned in the morning he would probably go to the police, but I didn't see what they could do. It was extremely unlikely that De Sejac had any right in the villa. He had probably found it deserted and felt that it would serve his purpose admirably, but there would be no connection between him and the real owner.

De Sejac would be livid when he discovered that he had trapped the wrong man, and I fell to wondering miserably what was in store for me.

VII

I never want to spend another day like the one that followed. It wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't had that blow on the head, but an injury of that kind means fever—and fever begets thirst. After I had ruminated for a bit on the conversation that I've told you about, I dropped into an uneasy sleep. I don't think it could have lasted more than an hour or so, but my hands being tied behind me I could not get at my watch, and as the room remained in semi-darkness I had no means of judging the passage of time.

Soon after I woke up, I noticed that the streaks of light which filtered through the floorboards of the ceiling were white instead of golden, so I guessed that it was day—but how far advanced it was I could not tell; and from the brooding silence of the place, I feared for the moment that in some way they had learned how their plans had miscarried, and left me there to die.

That was a pretty bad half-hour I don't mind telling you—and it seemed an age to me. Once, I really panicked, and nearly burst a blood vessel in straining to free myself from the cords with which they had bound me, but it was useless—they had trussed me like a Surrey fowl, and I couldn't free a single limb.

Then suddenly I stopped struggling. It was the girl's voice—low but clear, and she was singing somewhere above me, a song out of Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet*. I rolled over into a more comfortable position and lay there listening.

Her voice struck some chord of memory in my mind, and I puzzled over it for some time, but in the end I came to the conclusion that it was just the tune that was familiar.

She stopped as suddenly as she had begun, and afterwards not a sound came from above through the whole of that awful day. Every hour of it seemed like a week in my normal existence, and I thought it would never end.

Towards the afternoon I became a little delirious I think; the throbbing in my head had passed into a dull ache, and the gag cut my mouth intolerably. My tongue was pressed back towards my throat, and it may have been only imagination, but I began to think it was swelling and I feared that I should choke. My lips were dry to the point of cracking, and my throat so parched that I doubt if I

could have swallowed the drink I had never ceased to long for through the whole of that ghastly day.

I dozed off again, in a stupor of pain and torment, some time late in the afternoon, and when I awoke the tiny threads of light had changed again from the white of day to the yellow of electric candle power.

My first thought was one of relief, because soon now De Sejac or his man would be coming to visit their prisoner. Then little cold beads of perspiration started out on my forehead as I thought of what they might do to me when they discovered their mistake.

Criminals become dangerous when they are baulked, and my feverish mind conjured up a picture of their leaving me to die—a raving maniac in that empty house.

The trouble would start when the chauffeur got back empty-handed. Naturally Heels would not send the bags to Angoulême with Toby still in Biarritz. The gang would know then that they had slipped up somewhere, and there would be the devil to pay when they came down to visit me! I sat there with my back against the wall, aching in every limb and a prey to every sort of reasoned and unreasoned fear. After what seemed an interminable interval I heard the door of the room above open and De Sejac's voice.

"Bring them in, Frederic, bring them in, and we will go through them."

There were footsteps, and two heavy thumps. You can imagine my surprise—it seemed that the chauffeur had secured Toby's bags after all, and I began to speculate on what could have happened. Perhaps Toby had not returned to the du Palais the night before. When he found that his car had disappeared he might have decided to console himself with the little French girl and gone to some hotel with her. If so, he had probably got back too late in the morning to stop Heels acting on the wire, and was even now cursing his unfortunate valet for a fool.

I had no chance to think of other possibilities, for at that moment a key turned in the lock of my room. De Sejac and his man were still talking in the room above, so unless it was the girl there must be a fourth member of the gang, and I braced myself to meet the coming trouble.

An electric torch flashed in the doorway for a second, and then flickered quickly round the walls—suddenly it came to rest upon my head.

"Good God," came a breathless whisper, and I was filled with an immense relief. It was Toby Sinclair's voice.

He hurried forward and untied me, but my arms were so cramped that for some moments I could not move them from their old position behind my back, nor could I close my mouth.

"Poor old Brandon!" he exclaimed, but for all his sympathetic words there was a hint of laughter in his voice. "What the devil happened? You have got it in the neck!"

I jerked my head in the direction of the ceiling. For the moment I couldn't speak; and the pain of the returning circulation in my arm

was agonizing, but I didn't want him to give the show away just then.

"All right," he said in a quick whisper, "I understand—we'll deal with them in a minute—feeling better?"

"Water," I managed to gasp.

He nodded. "There's a sink in the passage—I'll get you some."

It was brackish stuff, that water, and probably full of every sort of germ, but I sucked it down in mouthfuls as if it had been Imperial Tokay. Toby chaffed my arms while I was drinking it, and after that I felt better. Then I explained the situation in a succession of hoarse whispers.

The young brute sat beside me on the bed and fairly rocked with mirth. He seemed to think it a tremendous joke that I should have tumbled into this ghastly business instead of himself.

"Damn funny, isn't it?" I croaked resentfully, "still, let's keep the laughter for a little later on. How did *you* come to turn up here?"

"Simple, my dear Watson." I could feel him grinning in the darkness. "Heels got the telegram all right, and we thought it pretty queer, especially as you and the car had disappeared the previous night. Anyhow we put the bags on the train as instructed, wired to Angoulême for a fast car to meet us, and got tickets for ourselves. After that it was like shooting a sitting pheasant. All we had to do was to spot the chap that collected the bags and trail him here—I arrived about five minutes after he did!"

"Listen!" I whispered, "they're coming down," and sure enough we could hear heavy footfalls on the stairs.

"It's all right—I've got a gun," he breathed back in my ear.

"Don't use it," I said sharply. "You'll scare the rest of them—leave this to me."

You see, I thought I'd like to get a bit of my own back, and I'd noticed an iron furnace rake propped up against the wall. I leant over and grabbed it as Toby switched out his torch.

Someone was fumbling with the door, and it opened slightly, then, whoever it was, tried the key. I suppose they were surprised to find the door unlocked, but next moment it was pushed right open and a man came in. My eyes were so accustomed to the semi-darkness that I could see his form distinctly from where I stood behind the door, and I let him have it with the furnace rake.

Perhaps it was as well that my arms were still a bit cramped, otherwise I might have killed him, but the blow was heavy enough. He just grunted and slipped to the ground without another murmur.

Toby turned him over and flashed the torch into his face. It was Frederic, the chauffeur, and he didn't look like causing any trouble for some time to come. Still, we carried him over to the bed and trussed him up, just as they had done me, to be on the safe side!

"And now," said Toby when we had finished, "for our friend the Baron and that little slut upstairs."

I had another go at the brackish water in the passage, and although I knew it would take me a day or two to get really fit again, I felt ready for anything in the excitement of the moment.

Toby led the way and we began to creep up a flight of narrow stairs. The tiled hall was in darkness, but a streak of light showed under the door of the room above my prison, and we covered the few yards to it on the tips of our toes.

We could hear De Sejac and the girl talking, but we didn't stop to listen. Directly Toby got his hand on the door-knob he gave one jerk and flung it wide.

"Got you," he rapped out, as he flourished his automatic. "Put 'em up both of you—or I shoot!"

The girl was playing patience at a little table, and De Sejac was sitting near her on a sofa. Their faces were a study, but they obeyed without the slightest protest while the hero of the piece stood grinning in the doorway.

"Good evening, M. le Baron," he said sarcastically. "Didn't know you'd caught the wrong bird, did you?" He jerked his head in my direction, and I could see by De Sejac's quick glance at my swollen wrists and face that he realized how his plans had miscarried.

"Anyhow," Toby went on grimly, "the right one's turned up now—and caught you!"

I must say De Sejac kept his head magnificently. "You think yourself very clever, M. Sinclair," he said in a loud voice, "but there are others in this house also—besides Mademoiselle and myself."

"Don't bother to raise your voice in the hope that your chauffeur will hear you," Toby mocked him. "We've given him a little of the medicine you gave my friend last night. When he comes to, he'll be in the lock-up."

"So—poor Frederic," the Baron smiled amiably, "but there are others—one stands behind you now."

It was an old trick—old as the hills, but we were amateurs at the game, and it caught us—we both swung round.

In one leap De Sejac was on Toby—I heard the automatic clatter to the floor as it was knocked from his hand—I stooped to pick it up—De Sejac kicked me on the shoulder and sent me sprawling. There was a sharp struggle and a sudden yelp of pain from Toby as the Baron kneed him in the groin. Next second the room was plunged in darkness. De Sejac had hit up the switch as he stumbled over Toby and through the door. Something crashed in the hallway, and then I heard the swift patter of his feet as he raced away down a long corridor.

I got the light on again and grabbed the gun. Toby lay doubled up, writhing in agony on the floor, but I left him and dashed out of the room after De Sejac. A second later I came crashing to the ground. That cursed Frenchman had thrown a chair down behind him as he sped through the hall. It caught my shins and I took a frightful header. The pistol went off in my hand, and the explosion sounded like the crack of doom in that half-empty hall.

For the moment I lay there stunned, deafened from that shattering report, and three parts winded by my fall. By the time I had collected my wits again and staggered to my feet I heard a car engine revving up somewhere outside. I limped to the nearest window and tore

apart the fastenings. It took me a moment to get the shutters open, but I was just in time to see De Sejac crouching over the wheel of his car as it tore into the woods, and I knew that we had lost him.

I stood there with the night breeze gently playing through my ruffled hair as the noise of the car grew faint in the distance, then I felt my bruises gingerly, dusted myself down as well as I could, and limped painfully back to the lighted room.

Toby looked white and shaken. It was lucky for him that he had been only winded and nothing worse. He seemed to have pulled himself together again and was sitting in a chair near the door, staring at the girl with hard eyes. She had not moved except to lower her hands, but there was a look of fear on her face and she would not meet his eyes.

"Well, that's that," I said. "He tricked us properly, and we shan't see him again!"

"Never mind him," Toby gave a weak smile, "we've got the female of the species and she's worth a dozen of the Baron."

"What do you mean?" said the girl sharply.

"Why, you my dear," his smile broadened into a grin.

"But—but," she stammered, "I'm nothing to do with him—nothing at all."

Toby began to laugh. "You can't pull the pretty little innocent stuff on me—you're in this bunch of crooks all right."

"I'm not, I tell you," she cried indignantly.

"How did you come here then," he asked.

"I was brought by force. But De Sejac swore that no harm should come to me providing I did not try to get away. Even if I had succeeded I should have got hopelessly lost in these endless woods—and he promised faithfully that he'd motor me back to Biarritz himself to-night. Of course I realized that he was a crook. He didn't even bother to conceal that once he'd got me here. But what could I do then? I was scared stiff that if I tried to escape he'd beat me to a jelly—as he threatened to. If you were a girl would you have risked that when by just remaining quiet you felt certain that no harm would come to you?"

He laughed again. "Rats!—you did a little play-acting—enough to take in my poor romantic friend here—but that's all. Look at the way you led me up the garden path in Biarritz, too."

"I did nothing of the kind." She jumped to her feet, and a bright spot of colour glowed in each of her cheeks. "You pestered me, you mean—I didn't want to know you. You're just a conceited bore with a lot more money than is good for you—and you're a rotter too, jealous because your friend showed more courage than you would have done. I only wish it had been you that Frederic hit over the head!"

I couldn't help smiling—for once in his life Toby was getting the truth about himself, but I thought I could see through her game—she was trying to get me on her side.

"Never mind about me," he grinned, "and you'd better stop kidding. Decent girls don't come to Biarritz on their own—you know that."

"Why not?" she flared. "I'm of age, and I was left some money—why shouldn't I come to Biarritz for a holiday when I've wanted to for years?"

"What—and stay at the du Palais?" He winked at me. "It must have been a pretty useful legacy."

"Why not?" she cried again. "I haven't had much fun these last few years, and I wanted a real holiday. What's a fortnight, anyway—I could afford it!"

He gave a cynical nod. "You've got lots of friends in Biarritz I suppose who will give evidence about that, and about your character?"

"Well—er—no," she admitted slowly.

"In England, then?" he inquired, with a sneer.

She hesitated again, and her voice was very low. "Not—not exactly. You see my parents are dead, and I've been living for the last five years in Canada with an uncle. Of course, there must be people in England who would remember me—but I can't think of anyone for the moment."

"And you expect the police to believe that yarn?" Toby asked aggressively.

"The police?" The scared look in her eyes suddenly deepened.

"Yes, the police." He looked quickly at his wrist-watch. "They'll be here in about five minutes—I sent Heels on with the car to get them—while I had a look round."

"But—you wouldn't give me up to the police?" Her voice was desperate although her acting had been superb. I assumed that her story about the uncle in Canada had been just to gain time, in the hope that De Sejac would return and get her out. When she knew that the police were actually on the way she became terrified. "You can't," she shook her head violently, "you can't mean that you'd have me arrested?"

"Can't I?" Toby's voice seemed suddenly to have become quite amiable. "Believe you me, I can—you beautiful little stool pigeon."

"But that would mean weeks in prison till it could be proved who I am—oh, please, don't—please," she pleaded quickly.

"Months, you mean, on what I'm going to charge you with. That uncle of yours doesn't exist and you know it." Toby jerked himself to his feet and walked over to her. "But I tell you what—I'm a sportsman, and I'll give you a chance if you like."

"Yes," she breathed eagerly, and I wondered what was coming next.

The unpleasant look that I had seen when he was talking about his knowledge of women the night before came into Toby Sinclair's face as he stood over her. "Listen," he said sharply. "I'll hide you upstairs and say that you escaped with De Sejac when the police arrive—but there are conditions. I'll take a chance on your getting away with my pocket-book—in fact, I'll see that there's not much in it while you're about. But you're a damned pretty girl and I like you, so we'll take that little honeymoon through France together 'according to plan'. Now don't be a fool and try to kid me that a girl who is a crook has any moral scruples—I'll bet you lost your innocence years

ago. Be sensible. If there's any nonsense on the trip I'll hand you over to the police, but if you behave nicely I may buy you a dress or two when we get to Paris. What do you say?"

For a second she did not answer. Sinclair's proposition was hardly in the best of taste, but his assumption about women criminals is pretty generally correct I believe, and she had probably had to face far worse things than a joy ride through France with a man like him. I could have had her arrested myself, of course—but I wasn't particularly keen about arresting anybody now that De Sejac had got away; so if she liked to accept Toby's offer I couldn't very well interfere, though I thought it a pretty brutal business.

When she did speak it was so low that I only just caught her words. She was clinging to the edge of the card-table with both hands, but she looked him straight in the eyes.

"I thought you were a cad," she said slowly, "and now I know it. I'd rather go to jail than spend an hour longer with you than I've got to."

I saw him flush angrily, but he managed to control himself, and in an attempt to hide his mortification he turned to me with a wry smile. "Little spitfire, isn't she, Brandon?"

"Brandon?" The girl almost barked my name. "Brandon!" she exclaimed again, and stared at me in a stupid sort of way. Then suddenly she ran over to me and seized me by the arms. "You're Geoffrey," she cried, "Geoffrey Brandon—I know you are!"

"Yes," I admitted ungrammatically, "that's me."

Her grasp of my arms tightened, and as she shook me slightly it hurt like the very devil. Then she burst into a torrent of words. "You must remember me—you must. I'm Anne—Anne Richardson—I was at school with your sisters, I used to stay for week-ends at your mother's house near Pangbourne. That's years ago—seven, eight perhaps. Please—please get me out of this! I used to think you wonderful in those days—don't you remember when you fished me out of the weir—I even wrote to you from Canada. You *must* remember me."

Of course I remembered then. That's why her singing had stirred some chord in my mind. It hadn't been the song but her voice after all. As I looked down into her lovely anxious face, all the woman dropped away, and I saw again the long-legged gawky creature with the thick gold pigtail that I had known years before. Next second she saw recognition dawn in my eyes, and with a little cry of, "Oh, Geoffrey—please get me out of this," that radiant piece of loveliness was sobbing fit to break her heart upon my chest.

Over her shoulder I saw Toby staring at me with his mouth a little open. "Do you really know her, Brandon?" he asked, with a puzzled frown.

"I do," I said firmly, "and I'd like to tell you, Sinclair, that in this business you've put up a pretty rotten show—so when the police come you'd better hold your tongue—understand?"

"They're here," he said. "And I'm sorry, Brandon—I didn't mean any harm."

I unclasped the weeping Anne, and saw that three gendarmes stood in the doorway. Two of them had De Sejac handcuffed between them, and the third—a sergeant, stood a little in front.

"Monsieur Brandon?" he inquired, looking at Toby.

"No, I'm Brandon," I told him, "but how did you manage to catch that chap?"

"Your forethought, Monsieur, in giving us the number of his car—we met him on the way." The Sergeant's smile was seraphic.

When the formalities were over De Sejac looked at the Sergeant.

"You permit, Monsieur, one question?" The policeman nodded. The Baron turned to me. "What caused you, Monsieur Brandon, to lay an information?—was it some foolishness of mine when we talked that night on wine?"

"It was," I said.

He nodded. "I thought as much. You see, I am a Belgian, and my knowledge is not expert—I was tempted only to take the rôle as I knew the young De Sejac to be in Martinique—would it be too much to ask——?"

I smiled. Anne's small hand reposed confidently upon my arm, and I felt tired but exhilarated by a rare happiness, so I told him.

"When black grapes are lightly crushed and left to ferment, the 'must' takes its colour from the skins, but the juice of all grapes is colourless, and thousands of gallons are made every year by pressing black grapes right out immediately after the picking, when they give a perfectly good *white* wine."

STORY XX

THE 'PARKSIDE BUTTERY', IN WHICH THIS STORY OPENS, WAS INTENDED to be the 'Berkeley Buttery'; but the series was written for a newspaper and as a general rule the Press have a not altogether unreasonable bias against giving free advertisement in their fiction columns to any commercial undertaking.

Personally, I find that regrettable; because the name of any well-known London hotel is enough, in one word, to provide a complete and realistic background for quite a considerable number of one's readers.

Yet it is a rather surprising fact that comparatively few authors use the names of real hotels in their books—where they are perfectly free to do so. Instead, they go to some trouble to invent strange, and often unrealistic, appellations for the luxury caravansaries in which their characters dine and dance.

Arnold Bennett's 'Grand Babylon' and Oppenheim's 'Milan' were, so one is told, intended to be the Savoy; but for the uninitiated of twenty years ago they might equally well have been the Cecil, since pulled down, or for readers of to-day the Dorchester, which had not been built, when most of the stories concerned were written.

In my own books I have, from the beginning, followed the practice of calling a Spade a Spade whenever I have had cause to mention a shop, hotel, theatre, or restaurant, either in Britain or abroad; hoping thereby to increase the reality of the setting and, where a reader happens to know the spot concerned, sometimes to provoke a pleasant personal memory of it.

There is, however, a snag to this of which young authors should beware. The places mentioned should be incapable of giving poor service or dissatisfaction of any kind. I have heard tell of a poor fellow who once named an hotel on the south coast as a scene in which one of his characters remarked: "This must be the toughest steak in all England!" The result was a libel action which cost him many times the money that he made out of his book.

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

THE little group of smart young people had been talking 'spies' over their cocktails at the Parkside Buttery.

"But, darlings!" Lady Angela Wren declared in her high-pitched melodramatic voice, "the place is positively lousy with them. It's the price we pay for harbouring all these refugees."

"That's it. Cherishing snakes in our bosoms." Christine Marlowe laughed, and added airily: "I'm sure that dark woman over there in a mink coat is another Mata Hari."

"My sweet, the day will certainly come when you're run in for slander, and I don't think it's far off," Hookie Fairholme admonished her.

Vivien Pawlett-Browne said nothing for a moment, but under his absurdly long, curling lashes he had caught a glint of malice in Christine's eyes, and he felt certain that he had seen her somewhere with the Staff Officer who was now entertaining the exotic brunette. Young women like Christine were apt to make the most outrageous statements, he knew, and her words had quite probably been inspired by jealous spite; but it was his job—although none of his friends knew it—to inquire into such matters.

"What possible grounds have you for saying such a thing, Chris?" he asked idly. "D'you know her?"

"Oh, yes: only by sight, of course, but she's always with Army, Navy, or Air Force officers, and the other day I saw her in the Mile End Road. What could a smart foreigner like her be doing down there unless she was up to something fishy, I ask you?"

"For that matter, what were you doing in the East End yourself, angel?"

"War work, my pet. I'm simply ruining my hands in a filthy canteen."

When the party broke up Vivien beckoned a waiter and asked him if he knew the name of the woman in the mink coat. The waiter smiled: "Madame Zacconi, sir. She is often 'ere. She is 'Ungarian, I think."

It was not a matter with which to bother his chief, 'Old Frosty', but back at the office Vivien thought it worth a routine check-up and gave instructions for Madame Zacconi's mail to be tapped.

Two days later a report reached him that in it there had been a letter from a furrier in the Mile End Road, which suggested that Madame Zacconi had an interest in the business.

That afternoon Vivien paid a visit to the fur shop. Having discreetly questioned the shopman he learned that Madame Zacconi was a shareholder and sometimes came down to look over any new stock. Realizing that he would discover nothing more of importance there, it occurred to him that while he was in the neighbourhood he might as well have a look at a cigarette shop across the road owned by a Jewish woman who was on his list of suspects as an enemy 'post office'. It was just possible that she might be acting with the furriers. As he found the little shop crowded he decided to wait outside, and on stepping back from its doorway he collided with a young woman.

"Vivien, darling!" Christine Marlowe cried shrilly. "What are you doing here?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Well, er—I can't get into the Army so, er—I thought I'd do a spot of amateur sleuthing."

"You'd do what?"

"Sleuthing! I trailed your dark girl-friend to her home and bribed her maid to tell me where she went to in the Mile End Road. The answer was that furrier's over there, so—er——"

"My God! What next!" Christine giggled. "Vivien, the long-

lashed, playing at being a secret agent! What *is* the world coming to?" And she continued to chaff him unmercifully as he escorted her back to the canteen.

Vivien laughed too.

The following day he roped in his colleagues, 'Big Beard' and 'Little Whiskers'. The department had bestowed their nicknames upon them because they were both so secretive that each always pretended not to know what the other was up to, and 'Big Beard' was very tall whilst 'Little Whiskers' was very short.

Three days later 'Big Beard' telephoned Vivien.

"She calls there every day about three o'clock," he said. "We're certain that she's passing on stuff she picks up in the West End. Whiskers was watching through the window yesterday and he saw her hand over a letter."

Vivien grinned into the receiver. "Good work. I'll come down and join you this afternoon. We might be lucky enough to catch her in the act; if so, we can nab the old Jewess as well; I've been wanting to do that for some time."

At ten to three Vivien was standing in a side street, 'Big Beard' was on a corner and 'Little Whiskers' on the other side of the road. Half an hour passed; three-quarters. . . . They had almost given up hope, when 'Big Beard' lit a cigarette.

It was the signal. The three of them closed in.

As Vivien walked into the cigarette shop, followed by his two friends, Christine Marllowe was handing a letter across the counter to the old woman.

"Forgive me," he said blandly, as he snatched it from her. "If I'm wrong you can sue me for attempted robbery and assault."

Christine's mouth hung open. Before she had time to protest he had ripped open the envelope and glanced over its contents.

He looked up. "No, I wasn't wrong. Boys, look after the old lady. I'll attend to Miss Marllowe—or rather, *Fräulein von Engelburg*. Oh, yes, your father acquired British citizenship and changed his name by deed poll in 1928. Of course, none of your present friends know that, but you can't deny it, can you?"

He was just in time to catch Christine's wrist as her long scarlet nails clawed at his face.

"Come along, *darling*," he said silkily. "It was a pity, *angel*, that your jealousy tempted you to make that spiteful crack at the Zacconi woman; but we don't shoot female spies in Britain. I expect they'll even let you order your own meals from the Parkside Buttery while you're in Holloway—and how right you were, *my sweet*, about our cherishing snakes in our bosoms!"

STORY XXI

THIS IS THE LAST STORY IN THE PRESENT VOLUME, AND I HAVE SAVED it to the last because I have always thought it the best short story that I have ever written.

It opens by a comfortable fireside and the background is built up in that unhurried manner which a story should have when it has not suffered from over-cutting; yet I think many readers will agree that in these five thousand-odd words there are all the ingredients upon which one might have based a full-length novel.

Some readers may find the triple murder that it contains a little grim, and that the tale has a bitter cynicism rarely found in my books. But it should be remembered that Lilleth would never have become the sort of woman she was, and that Angus would never have set out to take human life with far less concern than he would have shot a fox, had not the one been plunged into the abandon of a world gone mad when scarcely out of her 'teens, and the other made callous to killing from a long spell in that land of blood and death, the Western Front.

Surely these are matters for bitterness, and more than ever so now that a second generation of our youth has been torn from its normal, decent course of life to be flung into a new maelstrom of ever-gnawing anxiety, grief, pain, and premature obliteration.

Blame Hitler if you will, but blame, too, those slothful, incompetent old men of our own race, many of whom still cling to high posts in the nation's administration. The leopard does not change his spots, and if they were too blind to see, or too lacking in courage to face, the threat of war when it was in the making, how shall they lead us to a better future?

But enough of moralizing! I hope that you will have enjoyed this very mixed bag of short stories as, if my publishers consider that the demand for this volume has justified its appearance, I have enough left to make up a second volume for publication in the Spring. Perhaps by then I'll be out of uniform and writing another full-length novel for that grand public which has always received the others so kindly.

VENDETTA

I HAD always known that Angus McReay was a pretty dangerous man to get up against, but quite how dangerous I never realized until he told me the inner history of that affair in Corsica.

People said all sorts of funny things at the time he got his divorce, but I never believed them. I'd known Angus for years and I loved the man; we all looked on him as the bravest chap in the battalion, and that's saying something in a Highland Regiment. When there was a trench raid or a night patrol, you could be pretty certain to spot one tin hat in the half-light a good three inches above the rest,

and you'd know Angus meant to be in the party. First man over and last man back—the men adored him—he could do anything with those Jocks.

He was wild, of course—mad as a March hare—and the brass hats loathed him. He was only a Company Officer, and temporary commission at that, but he used to talk to the Divisional Staff in a way that the Colonel didn't dare; after all, he was the McReay of Dundrinan in private life, and to his mind the stockbrokers or pin-head regulars who had wangled red tabs in the war were either crooks or fools. He would have been broken a dozen times if it hadn't been for the pukka soldiers at G.H.Q. They knew too much about his exploits to scrap a useful man like Angus, and he was on Christian name terms with most of them.

I always felt that if Angus ever came up against a really ugly situation, he was just the man to tackle it in an unorthodox way; but he was utterly incapable of doing the awful things those stories suggested; she must have been a lot to blame.

He had half a dozen of us up for a week's fishing on his water last spring, and when the others were leaving he pressed me to stay on. I was delighted, I always enjoy being with Angus, and the salmon were rising in the way you always hope for when you go to Scotland—but which so rarely happens in reality.

It was the second night that we were on our own. We'd had a long day fishing the water above the house, which is the best beat as you know, and a great day's fishing it was—I landed ten to my own rod, and Angus eight, but he got an eighteen-pounder, so we reckoned that made us about square.

There's no fun like it, but it's tiring work, and after dinner we were glad enough to settle down in front of the great wood fire in the hall, which is never allowed to go out, night or day.

We lit our pipes and talked casually for a bit—then he stretched out that long body of his to its full length in the arm-chair, and kicked the logs into a blaze.

"What's your theory about that spot of trouble last winter, Dick?" he asked suddenly.

"I haven't got one," I said.

He laughed. "Well, you're about the only man in Scotland who hasn't! Some think I'm all the saints and martyrs rolled into one, and others say quite openly that I ought to swing."

I shrugged my shoulders. "There was bound to be a lot of talk, Angus, but it will die down—as far as I'm concerned I don't give a damn what happened—I'm sure you did the right thing."

"That's nice of you, Dick," he laughed again; "thank the Lord most of the people whose friendship I value feel that way about it, and the others can go to the devil for all I care. I think it would interest you to hear the truth though, and I know you won't go back on me."

"Tell me if you want to," I said, as I refilled my pipe, so he went on.

"Well, it started in the bad old days of the war, when we were

all young and full of good red blood. You remember I got knocked out at St. Simon on the very first day of the Bosch drive for Paris—in March 'eighteen, I mean. I was sent down to the clearing station in Ham, but that wasn't much good. By one o'clock in the morning troops were pouring through the town—legging it for all they were worth—the retreat had become a rout. Ninety per cent. of the infantry in that sector had been either killed or captured, and half the gunners, too—but you know as much about that part of it as I do.

The thing that affected me was that in those twenty-four hours the whole of our organization behind the lines had gone up in smoke, so instead of being sent back to England I landed up at a French hospital in Nice.

I was pretty sick about it at first, because only having a flesh wound in the thigh, I should have been able to hobble about after a bit, and see a few people if I'd been at home—as it was I was marooned in the South of France.

It can be glorious down there in April and early May, and I soon found that it had at least one advantage—the French treated their wounded like human beings. They were most awfully decent as long as your medical report was progressing all right, and let you do jolly nearly as you pleased, whereas you know what it was like at home. The old women and the Purity League who more or less ran the show treated convalescent officers as though they were convicts. Every kind of iniquitous restriction was enforced to keep the poor devils from having a decent time after the hell they'd been through.

It was curious, the French didn't talk a lot of gush about what heroes we were, but they showed a marvellous appreciation in a quiet, subdued sort of way; the war was a much more vital thing to them than to us. Anyhow, when I said that I'd like to run over to Corsica for a week or so, they made no sort of trouble at all.

It was in that hospital that I first met Bill Rankin. He seemed a decent sort of bloke; I always thought he was inclined to be a bit hard and selfish—but he was devilish good company—and most of the other British in the place were a pretty dull crowd, so we applied to go on this Corsican jaunt together.

There were hospitals in Bastia and Ajaccio, and we chose Ajaccio. Of course we stayed in a hotel, but we were attached to a hospital for treatment. The boats from Nice weren't running, so we had to travel down the coast, and take the one from Marseilles.

You've never been to Corsica, have you?—the island is a lovely sight when you come to it by sea, at dawn. The sun came up behind it when we were about fifteen miles away—all that we could see was a black mass rising out of the water with deep shadows in front and a dull glow behind, then gradually the mountains were tipped with gold, and as the sun burst over the top it became full day.

I don't know much about scenery, except the Scottish variety, but the bay of Ajaccio is marvellous, too. Clear blue water almost completely circled by the shore. White and lemon coloured houses, then a belt of bright green vegetation—above that the greys and browns

of the scrub, white snow on the mountain peaks, and over all a clear blue sky—just like a picture postcard, only real!

We didn't think much of Ajaccio though, it's a one-eyed little place. We saw the house that Napoleon was born in, but the Corsicans are queer about old Boney. You'd think they'd be as proud as peacocks to have a great man like that born in their rotten little island—but not a bit of it; when he was quite young they thought he was a promising lad because he took a minor part in one of their home-rule riots—but when he began to take an interest in France, they considered he had gone to the dogs.

If you ask a Corsican his views on Napoleon, you'll find he simply spits and says—"Who was Bonaparte, after all?—what did he ever do for Corsica?" Talk about the British being insular! the Corsicans have got us beat to a frazzle. They like us, though. We owned the place at one time for a few years, and that was the only time they had self-government—they remember it to this day—we helped their great patriot leader, Paoli, too—but of course you bet we did it with our tongue in our cheek, just to make trouble for the French!

They're a lazy lot, those Corsicans—the women do all the work. The men sit gossiping under the trees in the square, which are pleached, to form a shady canopy. Rankin and I got completely fed up after we'd spent a few days wandering round the town, so we thought we'd take a trip up to Corte in the interior.

It's a day's journey by train, not that the distance is anything remarkable, but you are going up—up—into the mountains all the time. That railway must have taken a bit of building—some of the viaducts across the gorges are a dizzy height, and the waterfalls look like the trickle in a rock-garden miles below. The woods are wonderful, thousands of acres, almost all chestnut—and they say it is hopeless for the police to attempt to capture a bandit if he once takes to the forest.

Corte is an ugly little town. It seems absurd to find those tall Italian houses there, in which twenty families herd together, when there's tons of room for everyone to have a garden—but that's what it's like—or rather the main street, which is pretty well all there is of it.

The hotel was a ghastly place—most of the food had so much garlic in it that we couldn't eat it, and the flies were a perfect plague, though you wouldn't expect to find them at such an altitude.

The trouble started when Rankin suggested that we should try to get a mouflon. In the old days, shooting mouflon in Corsica really was fun, but the fools never troubled to preserve their game, and so mouflon has been almost shot out of existence.

Our landlord put us on to a chap called Caperno, said he might be able to arrange a shoot, so next morning we went to look him up.

He was a bit doubtful about it though we offered to pay him handsomely. Money means nothing to a Corsican—if it's going to give them any trouble to earn it they would rather go without. You can leave your cash lying about, too, nobody would dream of touching it—they'd murder you without a second thought, as I'm going to tell

you—but they are as honest as the day is long, and wouldn't pinch a cent.

After Rankin had been trying to stir Caperno into activity for about ten minutes I was no longer interested in mouflon—I had seen the girl.

She was a glorious child, Dick. Dark, of course, as dark as night—with the oval face and olive skin of an Italian. The Corsicans are as near Tuscans as anything, though they pride themselves on being a race apart.

I just couldn't take my eyes off that girl, and she knew it, too—her eyelashes were as long as my fingernail, and never in my life have I seen a finer pair of eyes. She had one of those moist red mouths, too—a natural red, no filthy lipstick business—she was *heavenly*.

Rankin brought me back to earth by telling me that Caperno would try to arrange a shoot for us the following day, and we went off to look at the fort. It's an amazing place that, built by the Genoese, if I remember, when they owned the island hundreds of years ago. One great single tower with sheer rock on three sides of it—if you fell off the top you'd sail down three hundred clear feet before you trashed on the rocks in the gorge below. I don't wonder they considered it impregnable—you can see across miles and miles of country, and on a clear day right over the Mediterranean to the shores of Tuscany on the Italian side.

When we got down to the bottom again, there was the girl—sitting on a stone bench outside the Fort—of course I spoke to her—there was a war on, and in another month I might be back in the middle of it, hanging on the wire with my guts blown out—and I was sick of V.A.D.'s.

My French is pretty rotten, and hers wasn't much better, but we managed to get along. It's marvellous what you can do if the girl's pretty enough to make it worth your while to try.

I asked her to be a darling and show me the local scenery—pity the poor stranger—you know the usual sort of stuff—and she promised to meet me there again in the afternoon.

I had boiled eggs for lunch, I remember—it was the only way I could think of to avoid the garlic, but even then some of it seemed to get through the shell. Rankin was a bit huffy because I left him—I think he was jealous of my luck, but I was far too keen on the girl to worry about him.

She turned up all right, and took me for a walk in the *maquis*. The smell of the wild myrtle was glorious in that hot sun. There were dwarf pines and olive trees here and there, so that you couldn't see a soul unless they were within twenty yards.

After a bit we found a bank, and sat down in the sunshine. The whole place was drowsy with the heat, and not a sound anywhere except the droning of the insects. It was heavenly there on that golden afternoon.

We laughed and chatted together, although neither of us understood more than one word in ten of what the other said. I asked her to meet me again that evening, but she said that it would be

impossible—she had only managed to slip out that afternoon because her father was away from home fixing up our shoot for the next day—in having met me at all she was running an awful risk.

I had no idea that they were so strict about their women in Corsica, and we're not used to that sort of thing, so it never entered my head till afterwards that I might land her in a mess; but in the meantime, well—I'm not much to look at, but I suppose my northern colouring had had the same devastating effect on her as her dark loveliness on me—what with her beauty going to my head like wine, and her willingness, and the sunshine, I had taken her—just as one takes a ripe peach off a sun-kissed wall.

By the time we parted, I was head over ears in love with that girl—that's how it was in those hectic war days—you made love first, and fell in love afterwards. As we walked back to the town I told her that I'd do a bit of lead-swinging—pretend I didn't feel up to a long day's tramp after mouflon, and let Rankin go off with her father alone next morning—then we could spend the day together.

When we got to within half a mile of the town, I left her to walk on alone, and 'gave her ten minutes' start so that we shouldn't be seen together, but when I came round the bend I ran right into her again.

She was standing in the middle of the road having no end of a row with a tall, dark chap. He had a long droopy moustache, and wore a black slouch hat—a typical Corsican peasant. He was going for her like the very devil, and I could see that it was about me from the look he gave me as I passed. I'd half a mind to stop and interfere, but I caught her eye and it was evident that she didn't want me to butt in, so the only thing to do was to walk on and pretend I didn't know her.

After dinner that evening I was just leaving the hotel with Rankin for a stroll in the town, when the landlord stopped me. He was in a tremendous state of excitement. It seemed that the man I had seen talking to 'the girl' was one Machio, and she was promised to him in marriage. The Corsicans don't give their young women the benefit of the doubt if they go walking in the woods with a chap—and Machio believed the worst. He had gone to her father and created hell; old Caperno had beaten her till she was half dead—and Machio was out looking for me with a gun.

That got my goat pretty badly—I wanted to set off there and then to give Caperno a dose of his own medicine. He was no old crock, but a burly brute of a man, and a damn good hiding was just what he wanted, but Rankin wouldn't hear of it, and neither would the landlord.

They pointed out that Machio would probably pot me in the dark from behind a hedge—it would be much wiser to wait until morning.

I had to admit that there was something in what they said, so I stayed in and got blind tight on cheap brandy—I wish to God I hadn't, though—if I had taken a chance that night I might have saved the poor kid's life.

Directly I came downstairs next morning the landlord told me

about it—Machio had gone to see her the previous evening, and to escape him she had rushed out of the house; he chased her with a stock-whip—as though the gruelling from her father hadn't been enough. He caught her by the Castle and started to lam into her—and she, poor kid, had tripped or thrown herself, nobody knew which, over that ghastly precipice into the gorge below.

For the moment I just couldn't realize it—that lovely girl, so full of life and laughter—whom I'd held in my arms only the previous afternoon—dead . . . smashed to atoms at the bottom of the gorge.

Then I saw red.

The landlord was a decent fellow, half French, and terribly anxious to do his best for me according to his lights. He wanted to fetch a police guard and get me out of Corte on the midday train before Machio had a chance to do me in. Rankin agreed—but I wasn't having any.

You know what it was in those days—we were so used to killing that we never thought about it twice, and since I had just spent nearly four years killing poor harmless Jerries, I had no scruples about starting a private war on my own.

I said so to Rankin, but he thought I was mad, and pointed out that I hadn't even got a gun. I suppose I could have borrowed one, but I didn't want to. I had my own method for dealing with the brute Machio.

I sat in the hotel all the morning, pouring that rotten brandy down my neck and getting a nice steady tight, just as we used to when we knew there was going to be a spot of trouble with the Hun. By lunch time I was nicely soaked—beautifully ginned up for murder, but my head was clear and my hand as steady as a rock.

After lunch I went out and walked up and down the main street twice. I knew he wouldn't kill me in the town but I wanted him to see me—I felt certain he'd follow if he did, then I went off into the *maquis*.

I walked quickly because that is tricky country for fighting in; he would have crawled round if he was given the chance and shot me in the back—I was making for the woods.

I can tell you I was thundering glad when I got to the end of that scrub—you could hide a battalion in an acre of it and not see them at a hundred yards. In the woods it was a different story—miles and miles of tree trunks, but no cover in between. I walked for about half a mile—then I sat down and took out a book.

I didn't read it, of course; I was listening with all my ears, just waiting for Machio to turn up. He didn't waste much time, either; in less than ten minutes I heard the twigs snapping, and knew he must be in my neighbourhood—then I stood up.

Deer stalking has been one of my favourite sports ever since I was old enough to hold a rifle, and stalking Jerries on night patrol in France had kept my hand in. I felt I could make rings round Machio—and I did.

We had a lovely game of hide and seek in those cool chestnut woods, but I was too mad against the man to keep it up for long.

After a bit I stood behind a tree trunk and waited for him to come out into the open. When he did I showed myself for a moment, and then dodged back. I wanted him to see that I hadn't got a gun.

Of course, he fell for it and left his cover, thinking to get a nice easy shot—when he was about thirty yards away I pulled the pin out of a Mills bomb.

You remember how we always used to carry a few in our pockets? When I was hit I still had a couple on me, and I refused to allow the hospital orderly to take them away, so I had them in my kit when we came to Corsica, although of course it was against the regulations.

I lobbed it over gently to the Corsican, and it fell just at his feet. The poor boob had never seen a Mills, I suppose, and he hadn't the sense to kick it out of the way—he just stood staring at it. Two seconds later it went off.

Well, that was the end of Machio. I wasn't sorry for him—not a bit. In my eyes he was a filthy murderer, the law might say it was an accident, but he drove that poor child to her death—I just felt that I had settled her account with him—and that was all.

When I got back to the hotel the landlord thought I was a ghost, but he was thundering glad to see me. Unfortunately, however, that wasn't the end of the story. In the evening he told me that Machio's brother—a chap called Credo—was on the warpath, and had sworn to get me, and he positively implored me to leave Corte by the next morning's train.

Well, I had no quarrel with Credo, and in my more sober moments I was a bit scared that the police might start making trouble about Machio's death. They turn a blind eye to these things as a rule, if there are no witnesses to the actual killing, because they're used to the native's way of settling things—but with a foreigner mixed up in it you never know—so I agreed to quit.

There was a spot of bother at the station next morning—I suppose Credo had found out from the hotel servants that we were leaving; anyhow he turned up and made a scene. Fortunately the landlord had had the forethought to bring a couple of gendarmes to see us off—they tackled Credo and took away his gun; I wish I'd understood his language—he had a marvellous flow; I would like to have put him up against Sergeant Brodie—d'you remember?—of 'B' Company; I believe the Corsican would have won! He was a villainous-looking brute, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor devil—anyhow the train chugged off to Ajaccio, and we sailed for France next day.

It wasn't till '29 that I married Lilseth—but you know all about that. Of course I was mad to do it, but she was devilishly attractive in her way, and I often think she was more sinned against than sinning. Had she been born in a different generation she would never have gone the way she did. As it was she had the rotten luck that's been our portion—she was just old enough to hit the war.

Well, she's another soul the politicians will have to answer for through their folly and conceit. When she ought to have been a pretty innocent going to dances under mother's wing, she was drinking like a fish. With her looks and money she was bound to get into

trouble in that topsy-turvy world, and before she was twenty she had racketed round with every rotten boulder she could find.

Of course, I knew all about that, but she'd quietened down a bit by the time I met her, though she used to give some pretty hectic parties in that flat she had in Paris. We went quite mad about each other, and she let me clean out her Augean Stable without a murmur. Then we decided to get married. She'd never been married before, as I think you know, although she must have had thousands of chances. I took that as a sign that she meant to start afresh and play the game. I think she did at the time, too. Of course, any number of my friends told me pretty clearly that I was stark crazy to get tied up with a girl like that—but like a fool I wouldn't listen to them then.

We came up here to Scotland, and we had a glorious summer; I always try to remember that when I feel hard about her—and the people round about were jolly decent. After all she was one of us, although she'd cut herself adrift for years, and when she returned to the fold as my wife, they rallied round splendidly, and took her to their hearts.

Mind you—no one could be more charming than Lilseth when she wanted to be, and she knew the drill. In the first two years the gossips hadn't got a word to say against her, but we couldn't live in Scotland all the time, and when we went to Deauville—the trouble began.

Some of her old friends from the Paris days turned up—one couldn't blame her for being pleased to see them, or refuse their invitations. I knew that it was playing with fire, and I ought to have put my foot down at the beginning, but I didn't like to behave like a bear.

Nothing really went wrong while we were at Deauville, but it unsettled her again. When we got back, she started to talk about taking a house in London for the winter—I saw no harm in that, and like a mug I let her have her way. We hadn't been in that house a week before the place was like a hotel. A cocktail bar going night and day, and odd times when I came in I found a crowd of strangers just helping themselves to the drinks, even when Lilseth wasn't there.

I came to hate that house before we'd done with it, and she began to blow up if I said the slightest thing. I told her once that her friends were nothing but a crowd of spongers, and we had our first real row. She told me to my face that chaps like you, and Archie, and all our crowd were just a lot of stiffes. That was because we happen to keep our hair cut and have decent manners, I suppose!

The thing that put the lid on it was when I came home one night and found a nigger in the place—some bird that played the drum. A girl friend of Lilseth's had brought him and they were dancing to the gramophone when I came in.

Well, you've got to draw a line somewhere, and I drew it damn quick. I shut the house down and took Lilseth back to Scotland the very next night—but it wasn't any good. Those months in London had made a different woman of her—she deliberately started in to make fools of all the people who'd been so decent to her up here—

and before I knew where I was I had to take her South again to save her from being ostracized by every soul we knew.

After that life became a perpetual wrangle—how I stuck it all that time I don't know. The only bright spot that I can remember was a six months' trip we did to South America, but even then we had a blinding row in Buenos Aires, and were home in four.

It was about then I discovered that she had begun to dope again. Poor kid, she was led into that by some rotter she was mixed up with in those after-the-war days—but she had cut it out completely before I met her. I did everything I knew to stop it; in fact, I should never have stayed with her that last year if it hadn't been for the hope of breaking her of that. I did keep it under for a time, but she had lashin's of money of her own to play with so I couldn't cut off her supplies.

In November we went to Juan. There weren't many people there and I hoped to keep her straight for a bit. It was there that I met Bill Rankin again. I'd only seen him twice since the war; he had some job out in Tanganyika and only came home once in four years.

He was an amusing devil and Lilseth took to him at once. We were staying at the same hotel, so of course we all went about together, and after the first day he moved over to our table.

It was Rankin who suggested another trip to Corsica. Naturally, I wasn't keen, Credo might be dead and buried for all I knew, and after a dozen years it was a hundred to one against my being recognized, but the Corsicans are said to have long memories, and I didn't see the sense of running into danger just for fun.

Lilseth had heard the story long ago. She just laughed and said she'd always known I was a puritan, but hadn't thought I was a funk—well, one can't have that sort of thing, although I suppose she was only pulling my leg. Incidentally, if I'm a puritan I'd like to meet a real bad hat—but then of course I don't like people who never have a bath, and I don't dope. However, that's beside the point. She'd never been to Corsica and was awfully keen to see it. I agreed to make the trip with two provisos, which were only sensible precautions. No visits to Corte—and that we travelled under another name.

Three days later Mr. and Mrs. Dundrinan and Mr. Rowlands stepped off the boat at Ajaccio.

There were one or two bars and dance places that weren't there when I was there before; they've been trying to boost the place into a fashionable resort—but they haven't had much luck—and otherwise it had hardly changed at all. The same crowd of stiff-necked looking peasants lounging in the square—the same dirty, poverty-stricken, blackbeetle priests hurrying to and fro—I felt we should be fed up with it in a week.

After a couple of days Lilseth insisted on going up to Corte as the scenery in the interior was the only thing to see—so I let her go off with Rankin, though I didn't like the idea much. You see, we'd been three weeks together at Juan les Pins, and it struck me that they were getting a bit too thick.

Mind you, in the last two years Lilseth had had a lot of chaps hanging round, but I don't think she'd ever let me down—if she had I didn't know anything about it, but then I'd always been on hand. Still, Rankin wasn't the type who's any too scrupulous where women are concerned, and I did feel there was just the possibility that if Lilseth had one over the odds, she might let herself go.

Anyway—I put the best face I could on it, and off they went; they were supposed to be away for two nights, but they stayed for four—of course they sent me a telegram on the second day about some jaunt they proposed to go on—but that didn't make me any easier in my mind—and when they did come back—I knew!

Rankin gave the show away—he was just a bit too hearty—he overdid the business of being so jolly glad to see me once again.

I turned things over in my mind, and I knew the time had come to make a break; the rot had set in with Lilseth, and in another year she'd be as bad as she was in those post-war days, when free love was the fashion. I'd done my damndest for her, but it was up to me to keep my name from being dragged in the mud. I decided there and then that when we got back to England I'd let her go her own rotten way.

It was the following afternoon that I caught out Master Rankin—not with Lilseth, but talking to a fellow in the hotel garden.

They were on the other side of a giant cactus hedge, but I could see them through the spears—it was my old friend Credo that he was talking to, and he was pointing out my window on the third floor of the hotel.

It didn't take much brainwork to fathom Rankin's little plot; he'd hunted out the Corsican in Corte, perhaps paid his rail fare down, and Credo was being put up to do me in.

I got away from those bushes without either of them spotting me, and thought the matter over. I hadn't got any Mills this time, worse luck! but I had got my gun. When we were changing for dinner that night I took it out and loaded it.

Lilseth saw me in the mirror, she was doing her hair at the dressing-table at the time. "What are you doing with that thing?" she wanted to know.

"Thought I saw that chap Credo in the town to-day," I told her. "I'm not sure, I can hardly remember what he looks like now, but there's no harm in being prepared. I wouldn't mention it to Rankin anyhow, there's no point in worrying him."

I clicked home the magazine and pushed it under my pillow; it was the automatic that I carried all through the war—you remember, the one the Brigade Major made such a fuss about. It was against regulations—but my life was a jolly sight too precious to risk it with only one of those antiquated service revolvers that they kept dishing out—when every other army had proper modern automatics.

We went down to dinner, and afterwards I refused a stroll round the town—if I'm going to fight I like to choose my own ground.

I went to bed about eleven; Lilseth came up a little later—I could

see she'd been ginning up with Rankin, but I didn't say anything—our light was out before twelve.

I had seen to it that the door was bolted, and as we were on the third floor I didn't reckon Credo could come in by the window—so I dropped off to sleep.

It must have been about four when I awoke—there wasn't a sound, and there was no moon, the room was black as pitch . . . but I knew that Credo was there somewhere in the darkness.

I lay dead still—I knew that was my only chance. I strained my eyes but I couldn't see a damned thing—the place was solid black. There's a queer sense which comes into play when you're like that—taut and waiting; I couldn't see, but I knew the other bed was empty—Lilseth was not in the room.

Very gently I edged my hand towards my gun, the relief when my fingers closed over the butt was indescribable—I drew it out by inches. I could see a little by then—very vaguely. Credo was standing just between the two beds. Very slowly I raised the gun level with my head on the pillow. I pointed it at the place where I thought Credo to be—then I just went cold all over. It was quite light in my hand, you can tell in a second if you've been used to handling a pistol—somebody had removed the magazine.

Pretty ghastly, wasn't it?—Lilseth, of course. Rankin didn't even know I'd got a gun. The two of them were in it together. The dope must have made her brain a good bit more rotten than I'd thought. They wanted to out me so that they could marry—I knew he was tired of Tanganyika, and I suppose he was after Lilseth's money.

I really thought my number was up as I lay there in the darkness. If I'd moved a muscle I was for it—I could hear Credo breathing, only five feet away. At any second the shot might come—he was so close there wouldn't be a chance to throw myself aside or duck. I don't think I'm a coward, but the perspiration was just streaming down my face.

Then he moved a little—ever so slightly forward between the two beds. I lay there with my heart thudding, and my mouth dry—then he moved again, and stooped to peer at Lilseth's empty bed. He was a quarter turned away from me and I could just make out his head. Suddenly I realized his trouble—he didn't know which bed I was in!—and that's what saved me. I clubbed the automatic, and swiped him with all the force I had.

He fell without a murmur across Lilseth's bed. I had the light on in a second, and I saw at once that I had knocked him out. It was Credo, all right—black slouch hat and all. For the moment I was too relieved to think coherently, and I just sat there staring at his body—then I began to wonder how he had got in.

The door was unbolted, of course, but that would have been Lilseth when she left the room. I went to the window—that was the way he had come. How he'd managed to rig a thirty-foot ladder I don't know—perhaps he got a pal to help him.

As I stood there an idea began to form in my mind—I looked at

Credo, he would be coming round in a minute—so I hadn't got much time.

I took his gun, a long-barrelled, ancient-looking piece, but pretty deadly, I expect, and went into the passage. Rankin's room was next to mine. I tried the door, it wasn't locked—I opened it very, very gently. The room was dark, he must have been dozing, I suppose—then with infinite caution I removed the key. I propped the gun against the wall inside, and crept back to my room.

Credo showed signs of coming round, so I didn't waste a second. I picked him up like a sack of coal. He was a pretty useful weight, but I was strong enough to manage it. I had left Rankin's door ajar, so I pushed it with my shoulder, and lowered Credo to the floor.

Rankin sat up in bed—wide awake at once. "Who's that?" he said, but he didn't put on the light—of course, Lilseth was with him in the darkness. They must have been lying there for hours waiting to hear the shot, and both fallen half asleep.

"It's only me," I told him, "I can't make out where Lilseth is, she's not in bed—I thought she might have come to you for some brandy if she was feeling rotten—ours has run out."

"She hasn't been here," he stammered quickly, and I could tell from his voice that he was scared.

Credo was stirring at my feet—I stooped down and put the gun in his hand—then very gently I slipped out . . . and I locked the door behind me."

"So that's how it happened," I said.

Angus nodded. "That's it—Rankin must have heard Credo moving near the door, and thought it was me—he didn't dare put on the light. Credo was dazed when he came to—but he found he'd got his gun. When Rankin got out of bed to investigate, Credo shot him—in mistake for me."

I nodded. "And of course, Lilseth being locked in Rankin's room gave you the evidence for the divorce—but what happened to Credo?"

Angus laughed. "The poor brute broke his neck. You see he never knew that he had been moved into Rankin's room, so when he stepped out on his ladder—it wasn't there!"

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